# T. B. Maston

# SUFFERING

## A Personal Perspective

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"Dr. Maston has shared with us the distillate of many years of personal experience in his most challenging book *Suffering: A Personal Perspective.* The author can truly join with the prophet of old in the statement, 'I sat where they sat.' From many years of personal experience with what could be interpreted as a burden but which was accepted as a channel for the deepening of his faith in God and his desire to help others, there has come a book that will mean much to the individual sufferer, to the clergyman, and to the physician. May every reader be imbued with the inspiration of this practical, lucid interpretation of human suffering."

This excerpt from the foreword by Milford O. Rouse, M.D., sets forth the basic content of this inspiring book.

The author writes, not as a theologian or philosopher, but as a layman who has experienced the universal pangs of personal suffering. He is concerned primarily with the physical and mental suffering that comes to all of us and presents a perspective that is challenging and worthy of consideration.

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# SUFFERING

## A Personal Perspective

T. B. Maston

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# Foreword

From the dawn of recorded history the areas of human suffering have brought questions difficult to answer to all mankind, but particularly to the theologian and physician. After Adam and Eve defaulted in the Garden of Eden, their Creator, with all his love and justice, announced that sorrow and suffering would be the universal lot of mankind henceforth. Perhaps it is of significance that the word "suffer" is derived from roots indicating "to bear up under."

Much has been said and written upon the subject of human suffering, and now Dr. Maston has shared with us the distillate of many years of personal experience in his most challenging book, SUFFERING: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE. The author can truly join with the prophet of old in the statement, "I sat where they sat." From many years of personal experience with what could be interpreted as a burden but which was accepted as a channel for the deepening of his faith in God and his desire to help others, there has come a book that will mean much to the individual sufferer, to the clergyman, and to the physician. May every reader be imbued with the inspiration of this practical, lucid interpretation of human suffering.

MILFORD O. ROUSE, M.D.

TO
TOM Mc

# Preface

There is no attempt in this book to discuss evil or even suffering in general. This has been done by theologians and philosophers through the centuries. The present volume is concerned primarily with the physical and mental suffering that comes, sooner or later, to all who belong to the human race. No attention will be given to animal suffering, except in an incidental way. Redemptive suffering, which is suffering of a special type with a distinctive motive, is not within the scope of the main purpose of this book and will be considered only in a limited way.

The perspective presented in these pages has been discussed from time to time in the classroom. It also has been presented to various groups, including the parents of handicapped and retarded children. Some who have shared in these discussions, in the classroom and elsewhere, have been generous enough to say that the perspective is relatively distinct. Some have requested, and even a few have insisted, that the position or perspective should be presented in a book.

These are the reasons for another book on suffering. You and others will have to decide whether or not it has been wise to put it in print.

Early in the preparation of the manuscript for this book three or four friends with varying backgrounds were asked to read it. Gordon Clinard, a former colleague and now a pastor, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on suffering, was asked to give special attention to the manuscript from the pastoral and theological perspectives. Larry Eason, who has dedicated his life to work with handicapped and retarded children and their parents, evaluated the manuscript from his particular viewpoint. It was also read by a physician and friend of many years, Dr. Milford O. Rouse. An active churchman and a frequent speaker to medical and church groups, Dr. Rouse is particularly interested in the topic "Religion and Medicine." Special gratitude is expressed to him for his willingness to write a foreword for the book. Each of these men took time from a busy schedule to read the manuscript and to make helpful suggestions concerning its improvement.

This book to an unusual degree has been a family production. My wife worked with me in the original writing, helping frequently with the outlining and wording. Many of her ideas have been incorporated in the manuscript. Our son Eugene and his wife Frieda have read the manuscript carefully. Eugene, as in times past, has been a severe and a most helpful critic. The book would not have been written at all except for our other son, Tom Mc, to whom this volume has been dedicated. In a very real sense this is his book.

Although all suggestions from members of the family and from others have been seriously considered, no one is responsible for the final form except the author.

A special word of gratitude is due to the secretaries who have typed the manuscript: Mrs. Phil Perrin, and particularly Mrs. Melvin Bridgford, who has put the manuscript in final shape for the publisher.

T. B. Maston

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# 1
# A Personal Word

In the pages that follow an attempt has been made to set forth as clearly and concisely as possible a personal perspective regarding suffering. It is not claimed that this will be the complete and final answer to the problem of human suffering. This perspective has been worked out, or better "hammered out," over a period of years.

Although we have known some of the disappointments and carried some of the burdens that come with life, the background for this study and the primary basis for the perspective presented in this book is one particular problem we have faced. The perspective has evolved from our own inner struggle with this problem.

Our older son, Tom Mc, was injured at birth. He has spent his life, more than forty years now, in a wheelchair. He is far more seriously handicapped than most cerebral palsied. Every voluntary muscle of his body is affected. He cannot talk, walk, or even sit alone. His mother or daddy has to do everything for him—bathe him, dress him, clean his teeth, shave him daily, feed him, even turn him in bed. I am not saying this to appeal to your sympathy but to let you know that this book is not mere theory. We have sat where many of you sit; we have walked and in some ways are still walking the road that you are on at the present

time. Let me repeat. This does not mean that there have not been other problems and burdens, but you would understand that this is the one more than any other that has caused us to ask and seek an answer to two questions: Why is there suffering? What is God's relation to suffering?

As many of you would know from your own experience, our Tom Mc has not been exclusively a burden. It may not be fair to speak of him as a burden at all. There are so many things about him that can and do add joy to our lives. He has a good mind and enjoys life. He has his favorite television programs and enjoys a good musical or dramatic production. He has an excellent disposition which is evident most of the time. Although he is timid around strangers, particularly around those who are ill at ease in his presence, he has a captivating smile and a twinkle in his eyes for those he knows, and especially for those who reach out in love to him and establish good rapport with him.

He is a good traveler and has shared with the other members of the family trips from one end of our nation to the other. As this is being written, he is sitting at my elbow in Beirut, Lebanon. Although his mother and daddy have been on trips overseas, this is the first such venture for the three of us together. Although he had never been on a plane before, he flew the Atlantic like a seasoned world traveler.

We have felt through the years that it was best to keep our son in our home. We are not critical of others who have thought it wise to place a handicapped son or daughter in a special school or institution. It is not necessary to spell out why we decided to keep him in the home. Let me simply repeat that this is a decision that will have to be a personal matter for every father and mother.

As you know, Tom Mc's presence in the home has influenced in many ways the other members of the family. It

has very definitely affected his younger brother, our only other child, and we believe mainly for good. It is clearly evident that the two are very devoted to each other, which is a source of deep satisfaction to us. Also, the presence of an invalid son in the home has limited our activities and movements to a considerable degree.

It does seem, however, that God has compensated in marvelous ways for any activities we have had to give up. For example, the fact that I have stayed closer at home, particularly on weekends, than I might have otherwise has made it possible for me to have a more extensive writing ministry.

The presence of a handicapped child in the home, as well as suffering in general, can and will be used of God to deepen and enrich our lives if we will react rightly to it. We are sure that our Heavenly Father has used our own experience to enable us to be more sympathetic with people who suffer and more helpful in our relations with them. We believe also that Tom Mc has been a real blessing, in a personal way, to many who have come to know him. In other words, our testimony is that life, in some way, compensates for whatever suffering overtakes us, if we will react properly to it.

This is enough of our personal experience. As we proceed with our study it is hoped that the Lord will richly bless you as you seek the answers to these perplexing companion questions: Why is there suffering? What is God's relation to human suffering?

# 2
# The Universality of Suffering

Suffering is so much the common experience of men that one can correctly say that to live is to suffer. It was Jesus who said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). This is not only true of us as Christians but also as human beings. Longfellow expressed the universality of suffering as follows:

> Into each life some rain must fall,
> Some days must be dark and dreary.

Suffering will join company with us if we walk long enough along life's highway. Sooner or later it will come and walk by our side.

A heavy loneliness has come or will come into most of our lives, and nothing can be more lonely than some deep sorrow or abiding suffering. Many of us have discovered, as was true of Jesus, that the last steps into the garden of deepest sorrow have to be taken alone. Some experiences cannot be shared fully with anyone else, except with the One who walked deeper into the garden of suffering than will ever be required of any of us.

Some sorrow or suffering may come and remain with us as persistently as our own shadow. The pressure may be

relieved to a degree, at times, but we know it will be with us as long as we live. This is the type of sorrow or suffering which is harder to bear than the death of loved ones. Time cannot heal the hurt; in some cases time merely deepens the wound.

It may be helpful when our world seems to collapse for us to remember that others have faced and do face the same or similar problems. If we look closely enough we may discover that some walk in deeper shadows than we.

We may even discover that many people have the same kind of sorrow and suffering that we have. For example, it may be that you scarcely knew there was such a thing as cerebral palsy until you had a cerebral-palsied son. Or, you had only a vague idea about the number of mongoloids until a mongoloid daughter came into your home. Then, when you looked around, you could see cerebral-palsied or mongoloid children almost everywhere.

When sorrow and suffering come into our lives, we should not feel that life has played a trick on us. It does not mean that someone or something has it in for us. It means that we are sharing the suffering, the shadows of mankind. We are becoming, in a sense, a member of the human family.

It is wise for the Christian to remember that suffering comes not only to the unbeliever but also to the believer. It is true that the psalmist says, "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them" (34:7). Does this mean that God builds a protective wall around his children, refusing to let any harm come to them? The experiences of many of his children clearly prove that this is not true. God has not promised to protect his child, in some miraculous way, from suffering; he has promised to be with him in his suffering. If the child of God was shielded in some unusual way, we would live in an

unpredictable world. The laws of life could not be depended upon. The Christian could violate them and not suffer the consequences.

If God thus intervened for his child, the child would become what someone has called "a cosmic pet," and a petted child is a spoiled child. Our Heavenly Father has no petted or spoiled children. It may be that God at times protects in unusual ways a child of his from physical harm. When this occurs, one can be sure that God has a special, divine purpose in mind. There is a sense, however, in which God's protective wall is placed around all of his children. He will not permit anything to come into our lives that will separate us from his love and care. If suffering separates us from him it will be our fault and not his responsibility. God may provide a physical wall around some of us; he provides a protecting spiritual wall around all of his children.

We can sum up by simply saying that suffering and the shadows that suffering brings come to all: the young and the old, the wise and the unwise, the educated and the uneducated, the good and the bad. It seems clear that the God who makes "his sun to rise on the evil and on the good" also permits the rain to fall "on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

### Physical Suffering

Spelling out the various types of, or causes for, suffering will point up in a graphic way its prevalence. As you consider these types you may find a number of them that apply to you personally. Think, however, not so much of yourself as of family, neighbors, friends, and fellow church members. You may conclude that suffering is indeed the universal experience of mankind, that existence and suffering can be equated.

Suffering comes to all sooner or later because of the death of a loved one. It may be a child deprived of a mother's or father's love and care because of a premature death. Much of the child's suffering is in ways that cannot be expressed. The ultimate results in his life will not be known until he matures. Then there is the sorrow that comes to mature children in the loss of an aging parent. Or, there is the deep sense of loss that comes when a husband or wife dies. This sense of loss can be very acute whether the couple has lived together for a short or a long time. Some of the loneliest people in the world are older people who have lost a companion after many years together. Many of them can understand what my mother said some years after Dad's death. Her statement was: "No one knows how lonely it has been since Dad went away." They had been married approximately forty-five years. In those years they had become one to an unusual degree. A part of her had gone on ahead.

A glance at the markers in a cemetery or at the obituary column in a daily paper will emphasize that death is no respecter of age. For example, with all the advances that have been made by medical science in caring for newborn babies, infant mortality ranks as the sixth most frequent cause of death in the United States. Other children die in the early years.

Death may come suddenly or slowly. A loved one may say, "Good night, I'll see you in the morning." The next morning one may discover that the "morning" has been postponed until they meet on God's tomorrow. On the other hand, death may be preceded by long weeks, months, and even years of such intense suffering that the sufferer and his family will welcome the relief that death alone can bring. The latter is possibly more frequently true of cancer victims than of other diseases. Arthritis, particularly rheumatoid

arthritis, which is widespread, may rival cancer as a cause of prolonged suffering. Some types of heart trouble also bring intense suffering.

Almost any disease will cause a certain amount of suffering. Some may cause acute suffering which can be relieved by nature, medicine, or surgery. Other diseases cannot be so readily relieved, and the suffering is more continuous. Among these are asthma, tuberculosis (not as prevalent now as formerly), diabetes, and strokes that are not fatal but may leave one permanently impaired.

There are numerous other causes of physical suffering, including muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis, certain cases of cerebral hemorrhage, and comparable diseases, which at the present level of medical knowledge have to be considered creeping death. Loved ones have to stand by helplessly and see the victims worsen gradually until death comes. Sometimes, as in the case of Julia, one may live for many years. She, as is true with others with muscular dystrophy or similar ailments, became entirely dependent on the tender, loving hands of her husband or others to do everything for her.

Or, there is the fine Christian couple whose young son has cystic fibrosis. Although some progress is being made in the treatment of the disease, it now seems that he will linger for only a short time to bless and to deepen their lives and the lives of the other children in the home.

Other diseases, such as nephritis, are sometimes incurable and bring death after years of suffering.

This listing of the different types of physical suffering would not be complete without mentioning the children who are congenital cripples. Some are born with twisted, deformed bodies, while others come into the world without

one or more limbs. In addition, blindness and deafness are often congenital.

Accidents are another cause of untold suffering for many. The fourth most frequent cause of deaths in the United States, accidents are the leading killer of people under thirty-four years of age. In addition to the more than one hundred thousand accidental deaths a year, with approximately half of these in motor vehicle mishaps, there are over ten million people who are disabled annually for longer or shorter periods of time by accidents of all types: falls, fires, the mishandling of firearms, and motor vehicle crashes. Many victims of these, as some of you know, are injured for life.

### Mental Illness

In addition to the suffering that comes because of death or disease, a great deal of suffering results from mental illnesses and emotional disturbances of various kinds. There are approximately as many hospital beds occupied in the United States by the mentally ill as by the physically ill. Although marked progress has been made in recent years in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, yet the most recent report revealed 760,000 patients served in one year by public mental hospitals, with approximately 150,000 of these living outside the hospitals. It was estimated that an additional 650,000 were served by privately operated psychiatric clinics. The mentally and emotionally disturbed who are not hospitalized frequently suffer much more personally than those who have so completely lost contact with reality that they have had to be institutionalized.

A recent estimate suggested that there are 126,000 children born each year in the United States who will become mentally retarded. It is estimated that there are 6,000,000 to 9,000,000 retarded in the country, with only 4 percent

of them in institutions. The 96 percent place a tremendous responsibility on the families and the communities where they live. The churches, as the representatives of the compassionate Christ in the world, share in this responsibility.

It is difficult to know how much the mentally retarded personally suffer. Most of those who are surrounded with an atmosphere of love and understanding seem to be happy. Unfortunately, some are rejected by members of their families and by neighbors. These must suffer a great deal. Just the fact that they sense they are different undoubtedly causes considerable suffering to some.

Whether or not the mentally ill and retarded themselves suffer, their parents and other loved ones frequently do. Much of their suffering stems from the attitude of people toward the mentally ill and retarded. It is unfortunate that many people seem to think it a disgrace to have a mentally ill or retarded member of the family. It is doubly unfortunate when the parents or other loved ones have this attitude. Certainly Christians should seek in this area, as well as in other areas, to have more of the spirit and mind of Christ. He understood and reached out, over and over again, to help the mentally sick as well as the physically sick and handicapped.

Think again of friends, neighbors, fellow church members. How many have some type of mental illness or retardation in their families? Such problems are common enough that preachers and other public speakers should not use the mentally handicapped as a basis for illustrations, and particularly they should not joke about anyone who is physically or mentally handicapped. A speaker can be relatively sure that if he jokes about anyone who is handicapped, he is going to hurt deeply one or more people in the congregation or group who have a handicapped member of their family.

There are many, many other types of suffering. There are homes where there is constant tension, and although the home has held together, the husband and wife have failed to make a satisfactory adjustment to one another in the most intimate and most important human relationship. Other homes have been broken by separation and divorce, and the father or mother must serve as both father and mother for growing sons and daughters. The lives of the children may be scarred much more deeply than the life of the mother or father. Then, think of the millions who suffer as the result of alcoholism, with five to six million alcoholics in the United States and the number constantly increasing. Still others suffer because a member of the family has become a drug or gambling addict.

Many parents suffer because of disappointment in a son or daughter. This disappointment comes sometimes to the best of Christian homes. One of the best women we know has suffered as much as anyone. There have been numerous sources for her suffering, but none greater than the wild and wicked life of a daughter. There are even some Christian homes that suffer because of the imprisonment of a member of the family. The suffering is increased because of the attitude of other people, including Christians, toward the one imprisoned and his or her family.

There is still another type of suffering that affects many of us sooner or later. It comes when one awakens to the fact that he is not going to realize all the dreams he has had for his life. Most frequently this type of disappointment comes to the man. The seriousness of the problem is tremendously increased if his wife and family are unusually ambitious for him and clearly reveal their disappointment that he has not measured up to their expectations.

### Suffering with Others

One type of suffering has been mentioned that possibly should be spelled out more specifically or underscored again. It is in a sense a vicarious type of suffering and is involved to some degree in almost every case of suffering. It is that which relatives or friends experience when a loved one suffers. Such suffering is frequently the lot of the parents of retarded children. Certainly they suffer personally and directly, but frequently their deepest concern is for the welfare and security of the son or daughter. The same is frequently true of the parents of the physically handicapped. While the handicapped can be a major care to parents, it is possible that they suffer *with* him more than *because* of him. Every time he tries and cannot do things that normal children do, there is a deep hurt within them.

One source of suffering for parents of a seriously handicapped or retarded child is their struggle of soul about what to do with him. Should the child be kept in the home or institutionalized? The parents frequently struggle not only with their conflicting desires but also with the possible attitude of others toward them—what will neighbors, friends, and members of their families think?

If you are struggling with this decision, permit me to say in a rather parenthetical way two or three things. No one can tell the parents of the physically handicapped or mentally retarded what they ought to do with their child. There is no general rule that can wisely be followed by all parents. There are some guidelines, however, that may be helpful to you and other parents when this problem is faced. Primary consideration should be given to the welfare of the child. If parents are convinced that it will be best for their child to be sent to a school or institution where he can receive special

training, then they should be willing to send him. In making this decision, however, they should not forget his emotional well-being and his sense of security. On the other hand, if parents are convinced that it will be best for the handicapped child to stay in the home, they should be willing to keep him and adjust to whatever inconvenience and limitations this may create for them. Naturally, in making the decision they should give proper consideration to other children in the home and to the family as a unit.

Every case is an individual case. There is no uniform answer to what is best or wisest to do. Parents who are faced with the problem should think through the matter carefully and should ask the Lord to give them the wisdom to know what they ought to do, and once knowing it, the courage to do it. They should recognize that the decision is potentially a very important one for the child, for other children in the home, for themselves, for other members of the family, for neighbors and friends who will be touched by the decision.

Almost every type of sorrow and suffering that has been mentioned is evident in our church and community. Ours is a medium-sized church. My wife and I sit behind the back pew with our invalid son in a wheelchair between us. We have been members of this church for a long time, and many of the members have been neighbors and friends of ours for years. Our church includes some of the best people we have ever known and some of those people have had unusually heavy burdens to carry. I would not want to embarrass any of them by spelling out their problems too specifically. But as I have looked over the congregation and have seen the many who suffer for one reason or another, my heart has frequently cried out with the prophet, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God" (Isa. 40:1).

The material in this book has been directed in a special

way to the last-mentioned group of sufferers—those who suffer because others suffer. Theirs tends to be a living sorrow which time does not and cannot heal. They may adjust to the situation, but at times the further they walk with the burden the heavier it becomes. These are, in the main, the parents of the physically handicapped and the mentally retarded. And there are many more of these children than one would think unless he has one of his own. Some of these parents and other loved ones would adapt David's words concerning Absalom and say, "O my son (or my daughter)! Would God I could carry part of your handicap for you!" (cf. 2 Sam. 18:33). One reason for giving some special attention to these particular individuals or groups is the fact that so little has been said, even in books on suffering, that applies directly to the parents and other members of the families of the physically handicapped and the mentally retarded.

It is hoped, regardless of the reason for your suffering, that you will find in this book some encouragement, some ray of hope. It is also hoped that you will get a clearer insight into the reason for sorrow and suffering, and particularly of God's relation to suffering. The latter is the major purpose of the book.

# 3
# Why Suffering?

This chapter will attempt to answer the frequently recurring question, Why? This is a question that disturbs the minds and challenges the faith of many who suffer and those who stand by and suffer with them. The question is particularly difficult to answer when it is the "innocent" or God's best people who suffer. This was one of the problems, if not *the* problem, with which Job struggled.

The Christian's problem, like Job's, is deepened because of his faith in God. He believes not only that God is a God of love but that he is also the sovereign God of the universe. The fact that God's children suffer, even his best children, raises a question in the minds of many, either about the power and sovereignty of God or about his goodness and love. If God is all-powerful and also loves his children, why does he not use his power to protect his children from suffering? There is no easy answer to this question.

A search for an answer provides part of the background for the perspective set forth in this and succeeding chapters. It is possible, of course, that we may never know the cause of all suffering until we are in the presence of the One who can answer every question, not only about suffering, but also about everything else that bothers or disturbs us. As Paul says, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully" (1 Cor. 13:12, RSV).

Some people contend that suffering comes without "rhyme or reason." They claim that there is no cause and effect relationship operative in the area of sorrow and suffering. This position is entirely out of harmony with the kind of world in which we live. It is not satisfying from the strictly intellectual viewpoint, and certainly it does not satisfy the child of God who believes that his Heavenly Father is the sovereign God of the universe.

Therefore, God must be related in some way to suffering. In what way and to what degree is he responsible for suffering? Is he directly or indirectly responsible? It is important for the sufferer to find a satisfactory answer to these questions. The answer may determine, to a considerable degree, his reactions to his suffering and his attitude toward and relation to the Lord. A mistaken conception concerning God's relation to suffering has caused many people to rebel against him when suffering has come. Or, at least they accept fatalistically the suffering, resigning themselves to what they interpret to be the will of God. The latter attitude or reaction frequently means a dreary, defeated life rather than a life of victorious triumph over or in suffering.

### Laws of Life and Suffering

A logical place to begin a search for an answer to why there is suffering is to examine the place of law in life and the relation of the Lord to these laws.

Foundational to the perspective presented in this chapter is the conviction that every area of life is governed or controlled by basic laws. By "basic laws" we mean laws that are written into the nature of things. Some of these laws may be incorporated into the statutes of a state or nation, but they

will be valid or operative whether recorded or not. Another way of stating our general position is to say that the basic laws of life are written into and are in harmony with our nature and the nature of the world in which we live.

In some areas, certain of these laws may be clearly evident, while in other areas they not only may not be evident but may not be known. Men are still seeking to discover these laws, laws that seem to hold things together and make them work as they do. One realm in which at least some of the laws are evident is in the area of health. For example, if a child is to develop and mature physically as he should, he must have a wholesome diet, adequate fresh air and sunshine, and the proper type and amount of exercise. These same things are essential for the health of the more mature as well as for the child. If any of these are lacking, health will ultimately be impaired.

Health laws operate in other ways. A friend of mine had a relatively severe heart condition. His doctor had warned him that he should avoid undue excitement and strenuous exercise. One day on his way home from work he passed by where some neighbor boys were playing touch football. He entered into the game with his usual vigor and enthusiasm. Approximately ten minutes after he arrived at home he had a heart attack and was dead before the ambulance got him to the hospital. Quite evidently God was not directly responsible for the death of this friend of mine.

Some other friends of mine had a son who was born prematurely. He was put in an incubator and the incubator was permitted to get too hot. The child was injured, and now a mature man he has been a constant care to his parents. He does not talk and so far as they know he does not recognize them. Did God send this upon this fine Christian

couple? Or, did he simply permit some laws of life to operate? You know my answer. Would you agree with it?

Unfortunately, some ministers and other Christian leaders tend to attribute everything that happens to the direct miraculous intervention of God. A family may violate every known sanitation law, and illness and ultimately death may come to a member of the family. At the funeral the following statement by Job is quoted: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). But did the Lord take away? If so, how? Did God step in in some direct way to take the life, or did he simply permit death to come?

Some attribute suffering to God's direct action when the real cause is often some natural phenomenon, explainable by the operation of basic laws. These people rebel, thinking that God sent it, when in most cases he would have had to intervene in some miraculous way to have prevented it. Do not misunderstand; they would not be justified in rebelling even if God did directly send the suffering.

The consequences for the violation of a basic law are not external to the law but inherent in the law. This means that in the truest sense the consequence or penalty is a part of the law itself; it follows as a natural and inevitable result of breaking or violating the law.

And let us never forget that the laws of life are no respecter of persons. They are color and culture blind. They operate for both the good and the bad, the Christian and the non-Christian.

So far we have restricted our discussion to the laws of physical health, which are so vitally related to physical suffering. Although the laws of mental health are not as generally or as widely known as the laws of physical health and are seemingly more complex, they evidently operate in

much the same way. If they are observed, mental health follows; if ignored or violated, mental or emotional illness comes. For example, one thing that is definitely detrimental to one's mental health and his emotional stability is too much preoccupation with himself. In other words, one of the healthiest things we can do is to become so concerned about others and so active in serving them that we largely forget ourselves. To adapt a great statement by Jesus, we evidently find mental health as well as abundant life by denying or forgetting self (cf. Matt. 16:25).

Some mental attitudes quite evidently violate the laws of mental health, such as jealousy and hate. For example, when one is jealous of another he hurts himself, his own personality, much more than he hurts the one of whom he is jealous. The same is true of hate. When one hates another, whether because of class, color, or condition of life, the main one he hurts is himself. One cannot violate the laws of wholesome personality, and there evidently are such, without paying the price in his own personality.

Whatever the type of suffering, it results in most cases from the violation of some basic law or laws. When these laws are discovered and conformed to, the result is a happy, satisfactory, fruitful relationship or adjustment. If violated, disorder, conflict, and suffering follow. This is true of relations in the home, the store, the shop, the plant, the legislative hall—wherever men are thrown into relations with one another. It is even true of broader areas such as the relation of races, nations, cultures, and civilizations. There are basic laws governing those relationships. Insofar as those laws are ignored or violated there is conflict and discord. Harmonious relations result from the discovery and obedience to the basic laws that govern human relations.

The basic laws in the area of human relations are closely

related to, if not identifiable with, the fundamental principles found in the Scriptures, particularly in the life and teachings of Jesus. For example, think of how the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12) would apply to many human situations. The same could be said for other teachings of Jesus, including his general emphasis on love, which is broad enough not only to include one's neighbor but also his enemy (Matt. 5:43-47). In other words, the teachings of Jesus express and conform to the laws that God has written into the nature of man and his world.

It is possible that some of the laws of life may be set aside or abrogated at times. When this is done, it will usually be in harmony with a higher law; the law is set aside to serve the good of man. This setting aside of a basic law may be achieved in some areas of the natural order through the ingenuity of man. For example, every time a jet plane takes off from the runway it violates or sets aside the law of gravity. To achieve this purpose certain other laws have been discovered and are utilized.

In addition to what man can do, it is possible, as we shall discuss more fully later, that God steps into the picture at times and sets aside some law. We can be sure that any time he does this it is for some high and holy purpose.

The fact that the basic laws of life, at times, may be set aside or abrogated does not negate the fact that we live in a universe of law, neither does it nullify the idea that the penalty for the violation of the basic laws of life is inherent in the laws themselves. Let us repeat that from the perspective of our study this means that most suffering comes as the result of the operation of the basic laws of life. Certain laws are broken or violated, and suffering inevitably follows. This is the normal, the natural procedure. When this does not occur, something unusual has happened.

### Sin and Suffering

How does the preceding discussion of the laws of life relate to the widespread idea that suffering is sent as punishment for sin? The answer to this question depends to a considerable degree on the meaning of sin. Is sin exclusively the violation of some formalized, verbalized law or commandment? Or, is it also a sin to violate or live out of harmony with the basic laws of life, which may or may not have been verbalized? My viewpoint is that the latter is sin as well as the former.

This is in harmony with the idea that the laws of life are from God and are written into our natures and the nature of things as he created them; to violate them is a sin against his purposes for and his expectations of us. The biblical conception of sin may be broader than this, but it is inclusive of this concept. It seems clear that this perspective would be contained in the idea prevalent in the Bible, of sin as transgression or as straying out of the way that has been marked out for us. The basic laws of life, in harmony with our nature, represent the way in which God would have us to walk. To stray from them is to violate his purpose and hence to sin.

If it is correct to equate a certain aspect or concept of sin with the violation of the laws of life, then there is a close relation between sin and suffering. We have suggested that the consequence for obedience to or the violation of the laws of life is inherent in the laws. Since such violation is sin, this means that suffering will inevitably result from sin.

There are still, however, some very important and pressing questions that should be asked and answered. One of these questions is, "Whose sin is responsible for the suffering: the sin of the sufferer or of someone else?" This has been touched

on briefly; it needs to be considered more fully. It is a question that has challenged if not plagued men through the centuries. It evidently bothered the disciples of our Lord. When they saw a man "blind from his birth," they asked Jesus, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). They thought that his blindness was a direct result of sin, and they were not thinking of sin in general. His blindness, so they evidently thought, was punishment sent upon him or his parents for his sin or theirs. This was the orthodox Jewish perspective: suffering was sent as punishment for personal sin. There was a direct relation between suffering and sin. One was the cause and the other the effect.

This was quite clearly the position of the friends of Job. He was suffering. They believed suffering was punishment for personal sin. Therefore, Job should acknowledge and repent of his sins. The book of Job, however, struggled with the perplexing and ever recurring problem of the suffering of the innocent. Is such suffering related to sin? If so, in what way is it related?

We know that in the case of the man born blind, Jesus did not agree with the orthodox Jewish position. His word to the disciples was, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). This statement by Jesus does not mean that the man or his parents had not sinned, although certainly the man could not have sinned before he was born. Jesus evidently did mean that his blindness was not *sent* by God as punishment for sin. The last portion of the statement does not necessarily mean that God had sent the blindness at all, but rather that he would use it for his glory. The remainder of the story reveals that God was glorified to a remarkable degree because of the man's blindness. This was done, pri-

marily, through the rich spiritual blessings that came to the man. These blessings he might never have known if he had not been blind.

We should not conclude from the reply of Jesus that he did not think there was any relationship between sin and suffering. We do not know what his reply would have been if the disciples had asked, "Who sinned that this man was born blind?" Neither do we know what he would have said if they had asked a more theoretical and theological question, "Would there be any suffering if man had not sinned?"

The answer to the latter question could lead us into a complex, theological-philosophical discussion. Possibly the most we can safely say with our present understanding of the matter is that most human suffering comes as a result of sin. We have to say "most" because of the suffering that comes as a result of natural catastrophes such as tornadoes, hurricanes, and typhoons. These evidently come as a result of the operation of certain natural laws, but so far as we know now they do not result from man's violation of any basic laws. This does not invalidate, however, our general conclusion that most suffering comes as a result of the violation of the laws of life and hence is the result of sin.

### Responsibility for Suffering

What about the answer to the other question: "Who sinned that this man was born blind?" Can someone other than the sufferer be the cause of his suffering? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, and I believe it should be, then some and possibly most suffering is not sent as punishment for the sin of the sufferer. Rather, it is frequently the result of someone else's sin or of sin in the human race in general.

It is quite clear from something Jesus said on another

occasion that he did not equate personal sin and suffering. Jesus was told of some Galileans "whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." He said to those who told him, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?" He then answered his own question as follows: "I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Then Jesus added an illustration of his own: "Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:1-5, RSV).

Thomas Carlyle once said, "Sin is, has been, and ever will be the parent of misery." We would agree with Carlyle if he meant sin in general and misery in general. We would disagree if he meant the sin and misery of a particular individual.

To keep us from feeling too smug and self-satisfied, we should admit that we have "sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), that among us "there is none righteous, no, not one" (v. 10), and that "all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). We should confess, Christians and non-Christians, that we have sinned against God and his purposes in our lives to a degree that we would deserve as punishment all the sorrow and suffering that has come our way.

Furthermore, we should recognize that some suffering does come as a result of personal sin. If the punishment for ignoring or violating the basic laws of life is inherent in the laws, then we can be sure that any time we violate those laws we must, sooner or later, suffer the consequences. Let us say again, however, that the suffering in such cases is not

sent in some miraculous way by the Lord. Rather, he permits the laws to operate.

One thing that keeps man searching for an adequate answer to the question about the relation of sin and suffering is the suffering of the innocent. Would God cause a son to be born an invalid or a daughter a mongoloid to punish the sins of a father or a mother? We do not believe so, and since we do not believe that the baby can sin before birth and that his suffering therefore could not be punishment for his sin, we must conclude that all suffering is not sent as punishment for the sins of the sufferer. While we would not attempt to dictate the way God operates, we feel justified in saying that much and possibly most suffering does not come as punishment for personal sin. God may and evidently does frequently use as a means to chasten his children suffering that he has not sent directly. We should remember, however, that the main purpose of chastening is to purify and mature rather than to punish. This should be true of parental punishment; it is true of God's chastening. At least we can be sure that if we will let him, our all-wise and loving Heavenly Father will use for our good any suffering that comes to us, regardless of why it comes. What we let God do to us and for us through suffering is much more important than for us to understand why the suffering has come.

What can we conclude concerning the relation of sin and suffering? (1) Most suffering is a result of sin. If there was no sin in the world there would be little if any suffering. (2) Some suffering comes as a result of personal sin. In other words, the suffering of the sufferer is the result of his own sin. (3) There are many occasions, however, when there is no direct relation between the sin of the sufferer and his suffering. Much suffering comes because others have sinned or even because a community has sinned or one or

more of its institutions or agencies have sinned. (4) In other words, we may not only reap what we sow, we may also reap what others have sowed. Furthermore, we should remember that others may reap what we sow. For example, many times a mother and children reap sorrow and suffering because of the sins of the husband and father. (5) When we say that sin causes suffering, we do not mean that all suffering is directly sent as punishment for sin, unless we use both "punishment" and "sin" in very general ways. (6) Suffering comes in the vast majority of cases because some basic law has been ignored or violated. (7) If suffering is punishment, the punishment comes largely through the operation of the laws of life.

# 4
# God and Suffering

One of our main concerns in this whole study is the relation of God to human suffering. Here we are not concerned, as we will be in a later chapter, in what he would do for his children through their suffering. We are interested in this section in his relation to the coming of suffering. Does he send suffering as punishment for sin? If he does, how does he bring or send the punishment? In other words, to what degree and in what way is God responsible for the suffering of the sufferer?

The first portion of this chapter will be largely a restatement and review of things that have been previously suggested. The rather frequent repetition of some basic concepts is deliberate. Some of you may not care to follow the arguments or reasoning supporting the perspective of the book. It is hoped that each of you will understand the perspective itself. For this reason portions of the perspective are frequently restated. Here we want to make several statements that summarize the perspective.

It has been suggested that all of life is governed by basic laws and that God is the author or the originator of those laws. It could not be otherwise, since he is the sovereign God of the universe.

The sovereign God is the creator of man as well as the

source of the laws of life. These basic laws and God's commandments in general are in harmony with man's nature and the nature of the world in which he lives. What Jesus said about the sabbath is true of the other basic laws of God. His statement was: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In other words, God knew that man needed the sabbath and provided it for him. It is John who says, "His commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3, KJV), or better, "are not burdensome" (RSV). This is true because God's commandments are an expression of his basic law, and are in harmony with our natures. This means that it is good common sense for us to seek to know and to live in accord with the basic laws of God. Since God has created man with freedom of will, we are free to obey or disobey the law of God. We should not forget, however, that the consequences of our obedience or disobedience will inevitably follow.

We acknowledge some difficulty regarding natural catastrophes such as floods and storms. It is possible that we do not understand how these fit into the purposes of God for man because we have not comprehended fully the causes for them. It may be that God uses them for man's good in general. It is even possible that some of them come because man has violated some of the basic laws of life. For example, the cutting of the timber off of hills and mountains in some areas has been a factor in floods and storms.

It has been suggested over and over again that the penalty for the violation of the basic laws of life is not external to the law but an integral part of the law. This means that the consequence or penalty for the violation of these laws is inevitable unless someone steps in and intervenes. The latter may be done at times by man or God.

God, who is a God of order, sees fit to let the laws operate.

This provides man with a reliable, dependable universe (and most of us prefer to live in that kind of a universe). Therefore, God, who is the source of the laws of life, is responsible for suffering only in the sense that he permits, with rare exceptions, those laws to operate. That is, most suffering is not sent by God; he simply permits it to come.

A preacher has a teen-age son who has been an invalid all his life. A mistake was made during the delivery of the child and he was injured. Who was responsible for the suffering that came into the home? Certainly the child was not; neither was the father or mother, who have had the care of him through the years. Let us raise the question again: How far and in what way was God responsible? He did not make the mistake that injured the child. Since the mistake was made, the child was injured. God permitted the injury to come; he did not send it.

Let us ask another searching and at times perplexing question: Should the father of the boy who was injured expect God to work a miracle for him and his son? Should he or should we expect protection from the operation of the laws of life that would not be available to others? Will you not agree that it is difficult for us not to become selfish and self-centered about suffering that comes to us personally or touches us directly?

If you are disturbed by some of the things that have been said or implied, it is hoped that the disturbance will only be temporary and that the ultimate result will be the clarifying of your thinking and the strengthening of your faith.

### The Will of God and Suffering

Problems sometimes arise and questions are asked by those who suffer because of a misunderstanding concerning

the sovereignty of God and an inadequate view concerning the will of God. There is a fine line of distinction but a very important one between the sovereignty of God and fatalism. One can believe strongly in the former, which is clearly revealed in the Scriptures, and still not be a fatalist. After all, God has created man with freedom of will. In other words, man can and does decide, to some degree, what happens to him. His freedom makes him responsible for himself and responsible before God. Our finite minds may not be able to understand how God's sovereignty and man's freedom can be made compatible, but they are both plainly taught in the Scriptures. We believe that our God, who is infinite, can do something that we cannot do and cannot comprehend. He can give man his freedom and still retain his own sovereignty.

Similarly, the will of God is so broad, so deep, so complex that it is difficult for us to understand it. The problem we have regarding the will of God is closely related to the problem suggested in the preceding paragraph. Since God is sovereign we tend to attribute everything that happens to the will of God. Unless we make some distinctions regarding the will of God this leads us to fatalism. People are heard to say rather frequently: "It would not have happened unless it was the will of God."

Leslie Weatherhead makes a threefold distinction regarding the will of God that can be helpful to us. He distinguishes between what he calls the ultimate will of God, the intentional will of God, and the circumstantial will of God. God's ultimate will is his big, overall, redemptive purpose or will that no man, combination of men, nation, or combination of nations can defeat. It will be done. In it his sovereignty is fully expressed. The other two, the intentional and the circumstantial will of God, are closely re-

lated if not identical to what others have called his directive will in contrast to his permissive will.

If we make use of the preceding distinctions, we can correctly conclude that most suffering is an expression of God's circumstantial will or his permissive will. It is not the result of the operation of his intentional or his perfect or directive will. If God could have his way and at the same time leave man free, it seems clear that he would prefer for there to be no sorrow or suffering. We believe that this is true because of the attitude of Jesus toward the suffering of people while he walked among men. He used his power to relieve suffering rather than to send it. We also believe that this is God's attitude toward suffering because there will be a place and a time when "God shall wipe away all tears" from the eyes of his redeemed ones, "and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4; cf. 7:17).

So when we hear someone say, "All suffering is the will of God," we need to ask the question, "What do you mean by 'the will of God'?" If you mean his permissive or circumstantial will, then we would agree. If you mean his perfect or intentional will, then we would have to disagree. We believe that most suffering is God's will only in the sense that he permits it to come. Notice that we have used again the word "most." We have to say "most suffering" not only because of the suffering that comes as a result of natural catastrophes, but also because we do not believe any finite man has the wisdom or the right to say how the infinite God will always operate.

When one understands that most suffering is simply permitted by God, he no longer will tend to blame the Lord for his suffering. Neither will he, in a spirit of resignation, say

as many have said, "I guess it is the Lord's will; I will have to accept it."

### The Cross and Suffering

Frequently, one who expresses such a fatalistic attitude tends to identify suffering that comes through the operation of basic laws with the cross. I am sure you have heard someone say, as I have, when a great sorrow has come, "I suppose this is my cross and I will have to bear it." How unfortunate it is for us to identify our suffering with the cross. The cross of Christ and our cross involve suffering, but all suffering cannot be equated with the cross. Only suffering that is voluntarily accepted and redemptive in its purpose and results can be identified with the cross. The suffering of Christ on the cross, voluntarily accepted by him, was redemptive and in harmony with and used to fulfil the will or purpose of God.

Jesus told his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem "and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matt. 16:21). It was from that kind of background that he said to his disciples, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (v. 24). It is clearly evident that he is not talking about our ordinary aches and pains or even the most severe physical or mental suffering that can come to us. His reference is to something deeper, something in the realm of the spirit.

This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of the cross in the Christian's life. A brief statement, however, does seem advisable.

Let us never make the mistake of identifying the cross with our suffering unless it is suffering that comes to us as followers of Christ and suffering that can be used by him in

his redemptive work in the world. A cross is something on which one is crucified. To be crucified for Christ means, to use Paul's terms, "that our old man ["self," RSV] is crucified with him" (Rom. 6:6), that "the flesh with the affections and lusts" ("passions and desires," RSV) has been crucified (Gal. 5:24), and that the world is crucified unto us and we unto the world (Gal. 6:14). Possibly the nearest to a definition by Paul of the meaning of the cross is in Galatians 2:20 where he says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Paul could say a thing that I judge none of us would dare to say, "For me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21).

To take up a cross means basically to crucify self, to place Christ on the throne, to deny selfish ambitions, purposes, and motives. This conception of the cross is not related directly to the suffering that comes through the operation of the basic laws of life. We have considered it necessary to say "related directly." The child of God, in the midst of his suffering, can so deny himself, so enthrone Christ, that he crucifies self and takes up his cross. It is his reaction to or his attitude toward his suffering that can be equated with the cross rather than the suffering itself. When a Christian reacts in this way to his suffering, this attitude toward his suffering can be used for the redemptive purposes of God. This correctly implies that redemptive suffering is more than physical; it operates basically in the realm of the spirit.

When we speak of the redemptive purposes of God we mean, among other things, that it is his will that all should be saved. His redemptive purpose, however, is inclusive of the totality of life. Any suffering that can be used by God to bring men to him and draw those who know him into a

closer fellowship with him can be correctly described as redemptive suffering. His redemptive purpose is even more inclusive than that: it not only includes every aspect of the life of the individual but of the world as well. Any suffering that can be used of God to extend his righteous rule among men, that will contribute to the expression of his will in any area of life, can correctly be labeled "redemptive suffering." In addition to the reactions to ordinary suffering that can be used for redemptive purposes, it seems that God at times directly wills suffering for redemptive purposes. This is the only way one can explain the cross of Christ if his cross is considered a part of the intentional will of God.

The ultimate result of redemptive suffering is always victory and not defeat. Following the cross is the empty tomb. In God's redemptive purposes the resurrection follows the crucifixion. But there must be a real crucifixion, which means real suffering, before there can be a real resurrection. Christ shrank from the cross because of the suffering he foresaw, but he endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Heb. 12:2). He could identify his cross with the glory of God, a glory which comes through the fulfilment of the will of God.

# 5
# Relief from Suffering

In this chapter we shall turn from the question, "Why is there suffering?" to the question, "What hope is there for relief from suffering?" For some people the latter may be just as pressing and disturbing a question as the former.

Relief from suffering comes in some cases through the passing of time. Time is a great healer, but there are cases where time increases the suffering rather than decreases it. Our concern in this chapter is with factors of relief other than time.

We shall give some attention, as we have in other chapters, to God's relation to suffering. We shall search for answers to such questions as these: Does God relieve suffering? If so, how? Does he work through ordinary processes as well as in unusual ways?

What is said in this chapter will apply to the relief of all kinds of suffering, and some remarks will apply in a special way to those who suffer because others suffer, such as parents and other loved ones of the physically or mentally handicapped.

There are some things we can do ourselves that God can use to help relieve our suffering, and he expects us to do what we can. Our response will indicate our degree of progress on the road to Christian maturity. Our concern here is

not so much with Christian maturity in general but as it relates to the relief of suffering.

It may be wise, however, to make a few introductory statements concerning Christian maturity before it is related specifically to suffering. When we first became children of God we were "babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1; cf. Heb. 5:13; 1 Peter 2:2). We are not supposed, however, to remain as babes. We should grow. The words "in Christ" in the above statement assure the vitality of this relationship, and where there is life and vitality there is growth. If we are not growing or maturing as Christians, we had better examine our relation to the Lord.

The Scriptures clearly reveal that the measure of the Christian's maturity is Christ. Paul says that the work of the apostles, prophets, and others who perform special functions in the church is to equip the saints, that the latter in cooperation with the former may build up the body of Christ "until we all attain . . . to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13, RSV). Williams translates the last part of this statement, "to a mature manhood and to a perfect measure of Christ's moral stature."

Christ is not only the measure of the Christian's maturity, he is also the means of his maturity. It is through fellowship with him that one matures. Possibly no experience matures us more than suffering if we will let him walk in the way with us. In turn, the maturing that comes through fellowship with him will enable us to adjust to suffering and to find some relief from it.

### Christian Maturity and Relief

Maturity can bring some relief from suffering. One of the surest evidences of one's maturity is his ability to accept or

adjust to the inevitabilities of life. Such an adjustment cannot remove the cause of the suffering, but it can and will give some relief from the suffering.

A family has a little girl who has an incurable ailment. The parents have seen her get gradually worse. The doctors have said that the progress of the disease and premature death are inevitable. So far, these parents, who are active church members, have not accepted the doctors' verdict. There is a sense in which they are fighting against it. Their attitude has created some problems for the little girl, for the other children in the home, and for the parents in their relation to the Lord and his work. We would not judge harshly, but it seems that they are only adding to the suffering of all who are touched by the tragedy in their home.

We are not advising a premature acceptance of the diagnosis of doctors. We are suggesting, however, that once one is convinced that his sorrow or suffering is inevitable, then to the degree that he is a mature Christian he will adjust to it and accept it. His acceptance of it will give him some relief from his suffering. He may continue to be concerned about the cause of his suffering but he will not unduly fret about it, making himself and everybody around him miserable.

Furthermore, as Paul suggests, mature men and women are not "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). Neither are they tossed about by the experiences that life brings. They find increasingly within them sources of strength that give them the stability to face the storms of life. They have discovered the source or sources of the peace that passeth understanding (Phil. 4:7). They also know that Christian peace is not an escape from life but a victory over life.

Still another evidence and product of Christian maturity

which will help us get some relief from suffering is an increasing interest in and concern for others. This will help us to forget ourselves and our problems. If we keep busy helping others and doing the work of the Lord, we will not have so much time to think about our aches and pains, our sorrow and suffering.

People who suffer, and particularly those who suffer because someone they love suffers, are tempted to become too self-centered. If they are not careful, their suffering tends to dominate their lives. There is always the lurking danger of self-pity and even a martyr complex. There are few if any attitudes more self-defeating to a child of God.

The mother of an invalid son was heard to say to a group of mothers, "I have found that I can bury a lot of self-pity in my flower beds." She is one who loves flowers. With her flowers she can, to a considerable degree, lose herself and forget her problems. We can help ourselves by developing an interesting hobby, something we can enjoy thoroughly. In this way we can find some relief from suffering. At least, let us never develop the martyr complex, never become habitual complainers.

Finally, the maturing Christian increasingly develops the habit or the skill—if we can call it a skill—of waiting on the Lord.

The Scriptures exhort us to rest in or wait on the Lord, and frequently they describe the blessings that come to the waiting heart. For example, the psalmist says, "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord" (27:14). Again the psalmist says, "My soul, wait thou only upon God" (62:5). Lamentations 3:25-26 says, "The Lord is good unto them that wait for him. . . . It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." The prophet Isaiah says,

"Blessed are all they that wait" for the Lord (30:18), for "in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" (v. 15).

You have seen this sign in shoe shops: "Repairs made while you wait." Spiritual repairs are made while we quietly wait in the presence of the Lord. No source is more effective for the relief of the problems, burdens, and sorrows that frustrate and sometimes defeat us than for us to rest in the Lord, to wait patiently for him. Can we say with the psalmist, "I waited patiently for the Lord"? If we can, then we can also say with him, "And he inclined unto me, and heard my cry" (40:1). God may not hear and answer in the exact way we would like, but we can be sure that he will hear.

### Miracles of Jesus

One purpose of the coming of Jesus was to reveal the Father. This revelation would not have been complete without the miracles. For one thing, by means of some of them Jesus revealed the Father's authority and power over the natural order. As the Creator, he was more powerful than what he had created. For example, Jesus could speak and the winds would obey their Master's voice (Matt. 8:26). This has significance for our study because the basic laws of life are the creation of God, and as previously suggested, most suffering comes through the operation of those laws. Also, as we shall discuss later in this chapter, God may and evidently frequently does use the basic laws to relieve suffering.

The miracles of Jesus also revealed the Father's attitude toward sinning, sorrowing, suffering mankind. Remember that Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). If we want to know God's attitude toward men, we turn to the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus clearly revealed the Father's compassion for those who suffer. Of

the approximately thirty-five recorded miracles, all but one or two were performed to relieve some human need. Most of them were healing miracles; with an additional three he brought the dead back to life.

Why were so many of the miracles of Jesus miracles of healing and comfort? It is generally suggested that Jesus performed his miracles as signs or proofs that he was the Messiah. This is correct, but it is possible that he could have performed even more spectacular signs or proofs. Is it not possible that Jesus used his power so largely to relieve human need simply because he wanted to? When he came into contact with suffering people, something within him naturally reached out to them. In other words, he had compassion on people. At times his compassion is related in a specifically stated way to his miraculous provision for the relief of people. For example, his compassion for the multitude was the basis or motive for his miraculous feeding of the four thousand (Matt. 15:32). On other occasions he was moved with compassion and healed the sick (Matt. 14:14; cf. Matt. 9:36).

Jesus not only had compassion on the multitude; he also had compassion on individuals. He wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), but he also wept with Mary (John 11:35). His compassion was particularized as well as generalized. In each case where it specifically speaks of his compassion for individuals, he used his miraculous power to relieve human suffering: the leper was healed (Mark 1:41), two blind men had their eyes opened (Matt. 20:30-34), and the widow of Nain had her dead son restored to her alive (Luke 7:13-15).

Let us repeat that Jesus revealed the Father fully and perfectly. The revelation previous to his coming had been only partial and incomplete (cf. Heb. 1:1-3). Men had not been able to comprehend fully the nature and character of

God. We do see, however, in the Old Testament, at least in embryonic form, the characteristics of God that are more fully revealed by Jesus. This is true of his compassion for people. God's compassion or his mercy is more frequently spoken of in the Psalms than anywhere else in the Old Testament. For example, the psalmist says, "But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth" (86:15). Again he says, "The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy" (145:8; cf. 78:38; 111:4; 112:4).

It should be a source of encouragement to all who suffer to remember that Jesus, who revealed fully the Father, performed miracles to relieve suffering rather than to send suffering. This assures us of a compassionate Saviour who understands and will help us in our time of need.

We should also remember that the greatest miracles Christ performed were spiritual rather than physical. It was a greater miracle to change Simon the cursing fisherman into Peter the matchless preacher on the day of Pentecost than it was to heal Peter's mother-in-law. The greatest miracle that can ever be performed is for one who is spiritually dead to be freed from his enslavement to sin through his union with Christ and to walk in newness of life (cf. Rom. 6:4). This spiritual and moral resurrection is greater even than the physical raising of a Lazarus from the grave. Christ is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25), not only for the physically dead but also for the spiritually dead.

### Modern Miracles

What about today? Does God work miracles to relieve human suffering? Can a child of his expect that kind of relief?

It seems quite evident that outstanding physical miracles are more rare in our day than in the days of Jesus and the early church. There may be several reasons why this is true. One possible reason is that miracles are not needed as much in our day as signs or proofs of the genuineness of the claims of the Christian faith. People today have the Gospels, with their record of the full revelation of God in Christ. They also have the other books of the New Testament that are devoted largely to an interpretation and clarification of that revelation. In addition, people of the contemporary period have the witness of Christian loved ones, friends, and neighbors. What could a miracle reveal that has not been revealed to them in countless ways?

Furthermore, there is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that is available to every Christian. Just before he went away Jesus said, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever" (John 14:16). Again in those closing discourses he says, "The Comforter . . . shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance" (v. 26). He also called the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of truth" and said, "He will guide you into all truth . . . and he will shew you things to come" (16:13).

Still another reason why there is not the same need today for miracles, at least for miracles of healing, as in New Testament times is the availability of the resources of modern medical science. God evidently expects his children to use what is available. This may be the reason why we hear more often of outstanding miracles of healing on mission fields, where medical aids are absent or are not so readily accessible. Whatever the reasons may be, outstanding miracles of healing or relief do not occur as frequently in the contemporary period as in biblical days.

That there are fewer miracles today does not mean that God never steps in in unusual ways to heal or to relieve human suffering. There are intelligent, mature Christians who testify that they or loved ones have been miraculously healed. Who are we to question their integrity or their intelligence? Whether the healing is immediate or progressive over a considerable period of time, they contend that it was miraculous.

A friend of ours had a serious back injury. The doctors said they dared not operate. The best they could offer her was life as a helpless invalid. One morning when her husband visited her, she calmly told him, "I am going to get well." When the husband told the nurse what his wife had said, the nurse's reply was, "She should get well, she prayed all night." Now, twenty-four years later, this friend is a dynamic Christian with a vibrant, effective witness for Christ. She says of the experience, "I knew as definitely that night that I was going to get out of that bed and walk again as I know now that I can walk."

While we do not question the reality of such experiences as the preceding, that is not the way God has functioned in most of our lives. We may be convinced that God has healed or that he has relieved our suffering, but we do not claim that this has been done in any spectacular way. Our previous discussion of God's relation to the basic laws of life may shed some light on the way he most frequently works to relieve suffering.

We have said that most suffering is not sent directly by God but that he permits it to come through the operation of the basic laws of life, laws that he has written into the nature of the world in which we live. Is it not possible that God brings relief from suffering through the operation of these

same laws? May not the doctor, the nurse, the medicine be used by him to bring healing and relief?

It does seem that God steps in at times and causes the laws to operate more effectively than they would or could have without his presence. After all, the basic laws of life are his and what he has created he can control and use. If he wants to step into the process in an unusual way, he can do so. And if the laws of life are made to work more effectively because of his presence than they would have otherwise, then a miracle has been performed. It seems quite evident that most modern miracles are performed through and in harmony with the basic laws of life rather than contrary to them.

Some of you have had experiences similar to mine when you have gone as close to death as one can go and come back to life. I felt then and I still feel that God stepped in and preserved my life. I started asking questions then that I have continued to ask through the intervening years.

How did God heal me, how did he bring me back from the very brink of the grave? He did not touch my body and heal in some unusual way. I spent four weeks in the hospital, most of five days in an oxygen tent. I experienced the lingering weakness and period of convalescence that usually follows any serious illness. However, I believe, although I cannot prove it, that I would not be alive today if God had not seen fit to step into the picture and make the laws of healing, which are his laws, operate more effectively than they otherwise would have. In other words, his presence in the laws energized them. This was done and I am persuaded is frequently done by giving the doctors and nurses added skill and in making the medicines more effective. God also helps the healing process by giving the one who is ill a stronger desire to get well and an increased faith that he

will. When these things are present God has worked a miracle, even though we may not recognize it as such.

God may do the same thing in sending suffering, but from the understanding we have of God through the revelation in the life and teachings of Jesus, we believe that, in an unusual way, he steps into the operation of the laws of life more frequently to prevent than to send suffering, to relieve than to increase sorrow, to heal than to bring sickness.

There is still another way that God works miracles for us. We have had the experience in our home, as some of you have had, of reaching what we considered the limit of our strength and our capacity to carry on. We believe, as you do, that there were times when relief came in ways that could not be explained entirely from the human viewpoint. Sometimes there was simply the giving of additional strength. We could not explain the presence of the unusual strength in any way except that our Heavenly Father through the divine Spirit had stepped under the load with us. When he does this it is just as much a miracle as if he had relieved in some spectacular way.

We should not forget, however, that any time God steps in and brings relief for our burdens and suffering he does so for a spiritual purpose. This is true whether he does this by abrogating or setting aside some basic law of life, or whether he simply steps in and makes the law operate more effectively than it would without his presence. His intervention, whether to abrogate or energize, is in harmony with a higher and holier law. He does it to achieve some divine purpose in our lives.

### Spiritual Relief

This is an appropriate place to suggest again that God's greatest miracles are spiritual rather than physical. It is even

possible that miracles of the spirit may accompany and in a sense result from God's refusal to give relief for physical suffering.

You remember the experience of Paul, the great apostle. He had a thorn in the flesh. We do not know what the thorn was. It has been suggested that it was a physical ailment that handicapped him in his work, such as bad eyes, malaria, asthma, or some other physical problem. Some scholars suggest that it might have been some type of emotional disturbance. Whatever its nature, the fact that Paul referred to it as a "thorn in the flesh" implies that it caused some suffering. Paul asked God three times to remove his "thorn in the flesh." The expression "three times" carries the idea of completion, which could mean that he prayed for its removal many times.

The main point, from our immediate perspective, is that God did not remove the thorn but said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength ["power," RSV] is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). How could Paul have known the power and sufficiency of the grace of God without his thorn in the flesh?

So it may be with us. God may not see fit to remove the cause of the suffering although we may plead with him to do so; but we can be assured that if we react wisely, we will have a deepened insight into the sufficiency of his grace for our suffering and for any experience that comes with life. And is it not possible, as difficult as it is for us to say so, that insight is more important and significant for us than for God to give us relief from our suffering? Can we not conclude with Paul, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities ["weaknesses," RSV], that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9)?

I am sure that you know, as I do, many courageous,

victorious Christians who have used their burdens and suffering for the purposes of God. Sometimes there is an equally courageous companion who stands by to share and to inspire. We know one man who has been in a wheelchair since his spinal cord was severed during World War II. His wife shares his burden and also his victory and courage. He was a graduate of one of our leading state colleges and was a commissioned officer in the Army. He says that when he fell on the battlefield in North Africa, Romans 8:28 came to his mind. According to the doctors, he was supposed to die. He was brought back to a hospital in the States. The girl he had dated for about three years went to see him. Two or three months later they were engaged. This one who has been his wife for approximately twenty-five years says that they were married with the full knowledge of his condition. In a more personal way she says, "I went into this with my eyes open and have never regretted the decision."

He later felt the call of the Lord into vocational religious service. He attended a seminary and received a Master's and a Doctor's degree in religious education. All of this he accomplished from a wheelchair, with his devoted wife pushing him to and from classes most of the time. For some years now he has been an effective teacher in a college.

There is at least one other great truth related to the area of modern miracles that needs to be stated. It may sound like we are moving in a circle; if so, it can become a wonderfully encouraging circle. The child of God who has discovered that the grace of God is sufficient for his suffering and for anything else that comes with life, finds that in and through his suffering there comes a deepened sense of dependence on God and of fellowship with God. In turn, the latter becomes a powerful, although possibly an indirect, source of relief from suffering. In other words, a by-product

of the suffering may give some relief for the suffering. At least the maturing Christian discovers in fellowship with God inner resources that give him the wisdom and strength not only to adjust to his suffering but also to become triumphant over his suffering. The sense of God's presence with his child is the secret of the victorious life.

# 6
# Prayer and Suffering

So far we have not discussed in a specific way the place of prayer in the relief of suffering. If God is an active factor in the relief of suffering, and we believe he is, then prayer has a significant part to play in its relief. Prayer has been defined as the finite reaching up for the infinite. It involves conversation or communication between the Heavenly Father and his child.

This communication takes place on the spiritual level; it is the communion of our spirits with the divine Spirit. Such communication may be formulated in words, but there are times when words are an encumbrance rather than a help. Who has not felt helpless as he has groped for words to express his prayer? At such times the request of the disciples very appropriately comes to our minds, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). It is Paul who says, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought." Possibly the latter is truer for those who suffer than for anyone else. How thankful we should be for the words that follow the preceding statement by Paul: "But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs ["groanings," KJV] too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26, RSV). We can be sure that his sighs or groanings are heard "because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (v. 27, KJV).

We can be sure that the prayer our Heavenly Father hears is the sincere desire of our hearts and not our spoken words, except when those words express our real desire. We may be able to fool our friends and loved ones with words, but we cannot fool God.

There are different forms or types of prayer. Our concern is primarily with intercessory or petitionary prayer. It is prayer in which we ask God for something. It is the type of praying we do when we ask God to relieve our suffering or to heal or relieve the suffering of a loved one or a friend.

We seldom stop to consider how we expect God to answer our prayer. Do we expect him to heal or relieve in some striking way? Or, do we expect him to use the ordinary processes to heal or relieve? At times the latter idea is present in our prayer as we ask God to give wisdom to the doctor, skill to the nurse, and added effectiveness to the medicine. Let us say again that it seems that this is the way God most frequently gives relief to the sufferer. He usually works through and not contrary to the basic laws of life. Since God uses the doctor, the nurse, the medicine, the ordinary healing processes to achieve his will, prayer and the physician both have a place in the relief of suffering in general and in the healing of the sick in particular.

The wise man in one of the books of the Apocrypha says that "healing comes from the Most High" (Ecclesiasticus 38:2). His admonition is "My son, . . . pray to the Lord, and he will heal you" (v. 9). He adds, however:

> And give the physician his place,
> for the Lord Created him;
> let him not leave you, for there
> is need of him.

> There is a time when success lies
> in the hands of physicians,
> for they too will pray to the
> Lord
> that he should grant them success
> in diagnosis
> and in healing, for the sake of
> preserving life (vv. 12-14).

Many Christian physicians recognize that they are partners with God in the work of healing. They believe that "the prayer of faith shall save the sick" (James 5:15), but they also believe that the anointing with oil referred to by James (5:14; cf. Luke 10:34) represents their part in the healing process. Oil was used for medical purposes in New Testament days as it is today in many parts of the world.

Mrs. Scott, a friend of ours, told us about an experience she had with our family doctor. Many sorrows and problems had come into her life. She had gone to the doctor for a physical checkup. After the examination, he gave his diagnosis of her ills and then asked her, "Mrs. Scott, do you know what you need more than anything else?" Without waiting for a reply, he opened a drawer of his desk and pulled out a Bible. Holding the Bible in his hands, hands that had examined many a patient and performed many an operation, he said to her, "You need to pray that your faith in God will be strengthened. You need to read this Book more and ask God to help you to rest on the promises you find in it."

Mrs. Scott needed faith along with the doctor's medical prescription. Without the former the latter would not be as effective as it should be. Her doctor was not only Christian enough but also wise enough to know that faith is a great

healer, a healer of the body as well as of the mind and the soul.

The importance of faith in physical and spiritual relief brings us to another question concerning healing.

### Faith Healing

Can the faith healer heal? A part of the answer came from a conversation with a doctor friend. When asked that question, he answered: "Certainly he can heal the diseases of many people, because their problems are in their minds rather than in their bodies." He further said, "Many of the people who come to me do not have anything physically wrong with them. They think they are sick, and in a sense they really are." He added, "If the faith healer can make such people believe strongly enough that they are healed, they will be." He even mentioned a case of a woman who had been in an accident. She recovered from it but still could not walk. There was no physical reason why she could not walk. Such a one could be "healed" if she really believed she was.

My friend's statement is not the total answer to the question about faith healers. We should not rule out entirely the possibility that some may have a special divine gift to heal. Paul mentions "miracles" and "gifts of healings" (1 Cor. 12:28) as special gifts from God. We believe, however, that certain things will characterize one who has a special divine gift to heal.

1. He will recognize that the ability to heal is only one of the gifts of the Spirit and not the most important one. Paul clearly suggests that there are other gifts that are greater. This is clearly true of prophecy or of speaking for God (see 1 Cor. 12:28; 14:1; and Eph. 4:11). Paul, however, speaks of

a "more excellent way," more excellent than any of the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy (1 Cor. 12:31). That more excellent way is the way of love.

2. One who has a special gift to heal will recognize that it is more important to bring men into a vital life-changing union with the Lord than to heal their bodies.

3. The divinely-called faith healer will recognize that the power to heal comes from God, and he will give God the glory sincerely and genuinely. Faith healing, when real, could better be described as "divine healing through faith."

4. One who has a special divine gift to heal will not parade or advertise his ability to heal. We cannot imagine Jesus, Paul, Peter, or any other of the leaders of the early church sending out publicity that they were going to be in town for a series of healing meetings. We do not believe that one who has been given a special gift by the Lord to heal will commercialize that gift. If this is correct, it eliminates most radio preachers and many other preachers who major or concentrate on a healing ministry. Some of them are religious racketeers. They capitalize on the suffering of people and take advantage of those who are searching for relief for themselves or their loved ones.

### Prayer for Others

Another aspect of prayer that is significant for our study is revealed in the Model Prayer Jesus gave to his disciples. An important lesson is taught, at least by implication, by the order of the petitions in the prayer. The first petition is, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). I have never forgotten when I first heard the matchless preacher George W. Truett say, "No man has the right to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread' until he has first prayed, 'Thy kingdom come.'" The child

of God is to seek "first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33) and trust that God will provide everything that is necessary to life. The kingdom of God and things that are spiritual in general should be first in our lives, regardless of how heavy our burdens or how great may be our suffering.

Let us repeat that the things of the spirit are of supreme value. Since we have been raised with Christ, as Paul says, we should set our "affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:1-2). Too frequently in prayer meetings in our churches as well as in our homes, our concern seems to be too exclusively with the sick and suffering. Certainly we should pray for them, but there does not seem to be enough concern for the unsaved, the unenlisted, the backslidden, and the spiritually and morally immature and disturbed.

Another word of warning or precaution may be in order: we need to be careful as we pray for our loved ones and for ourselves that our prayers do not become self-centered. This is a real temptation to many who suffer, and possibly to none more than the parents and loved ones of the handicapped and retarded. Let us repeat a question or two that we have asked previously. Do we have the right as Christians to ask or expect God to give us or our loved ones relief from suffering unless we would also ask him just as sincerely to relieve others who suffer? Should we expect him to single us out and give us relief?

The answer to these questions is not as simple as it might appear. Theoretically we could correctly say that what we ask for ourselves and our loved ones we should ask for others. There is a sense, however, in which we feel more of an obligation for our own than for others, and hence we properly can and do pray for them more consistently and more ear-

nestly. The New Testament reveals that Jesus frequently responded and gave relief to those who requested healing for themselves or for loved ones.

A brief statement should be made about our cooperation with the doctor and with God. As this is being written our family is in a part of the world where our doctor told us and our neighbors tell us that we should wash thoroughly all vegetables and fruits before eating them. We and a number of our friends have prayed that God will protect our health while we are in this area. Does the fact that we and others have prayed mean that we do not need to heed the advice of our doctor and neighbors and exercise the customary precautions? You know the answer to the question. The implication of the question has wide application to the whole area of sorrow and suffering in general. God expects us to do what we can to help answer our own prayers.

Prayer for others is a significant source of relief. As we pray for others who have heavy burdens, our own burden seems to get lighter. Some who are the most faithful and evidently most effective in praying for others are those who suffer intensely. Many of them become real saints of God. Friends and loved ones visit them to comfort them and are comforted by them. People go from their presence with chin up, with a lift of spirit, with courage to face life and what it brings.

### Prayer and the Will of God

This brings us to a phase of prayer that has an important place in the life of those who suffer. It is prayer for strength and grace to bear the suffering, and not only to bear it but to be victorious over it. It includes the request that God will enable us to use our suffering for his glory and for the good of others. We need to be careful even in this kind of

praying that it does not become too self-centered. Such praying can become an expression of an unhealthy introspection.

Furthermore, in all our praying we should attempt as best we can to pray within the will of God. His will should be our supreme concern. Let us not plead with God too much for ourselves or our loved ones unless we are willing for him to use his wisdom in answering our prayer. There is at least a possibility that he might grant our request and that we might see later that it would have been better to have prayed, "Thy will be done."

Mrs. Goss always insisted when she talked about prayer that Christians had better include in their prayer, "Thy will be done." The background for this statement was a personal experience of hers. Her little daughter was desperately ill. The doctors had given up all hope for her recovery. Mrs. Goss over and over again pled with the Lord not to let her daughter die. She said, "Finally the Lord heard my prayer. My daughter got well physically, but she never had any mind after that. She has had to spend the years since that time in a state institution for the insane. It would have been wiser if I had not begged God so much; or at least I should have been willing to say, 'Thy will be done.'"

Whether Mrs. Goss was correct or incorrect in her analysis of her situation, one element that should always be present in our prayers should be, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). One has not really prayed until he can say, "nevertheless," and the "nevertheless" is not really meaningful unless it comes from a heavily burdened heart that has sincerely prayed, "If it be possible let this cup pass from me." In other words, "nevertheless" is not an excuse for superficial, halfhearted praying. Earnest prayer that ends

in a "nevertheless" is the way of the peaceful heart, the triumphant soul. The preceding is true for those who suffer, whether their suffering results from some sudden passing crisis or is the persistent suffering that some of you know. The following may be hard for us to say but it is true: "It is better to suffer and be within the will of God than to be free from suffering and yet be outside his will."

I mentioned earlier a personal illness when I went as close to death as one can go and come back to live. After my recovery, my wife shared some of her experiences with me. We were far away from our permanent residence. I was in school doing graduate work. Although we had good neighbors, the house where we lived seemed terribly empty and lonely when she returned to it and our sons from visiting me in the hospital.

She said that as she prayed each evening before retiring for the night, she would close her prayer with the words, "Thy will be done." As she went to bed she knew that she did not really mean those words. She would toss and tumble all night long. One night when I was in the midst of a real crisis, she prayed the same prayer. That night she knew that she was honest with herself and with God when she prayed, "Thy will be done." Contrary to other nights, that night she went to sleep and slept soundly. Why? She had had the victory. That night she rested in the will of God. She could sleep because she was conscious that underneath were the everlasting arms.

This kind of submission—or would it be better to say this kind of cooperation—with the will of God is frequently written deeply into the life of the consistent sufferer. Here we have in mind, in a particular way, those whose suffering is not relieved and frequently not even diminished by time.

The mixture of the pain that suffering brings and the peace that comes by the sense of the presence of the Lord is even evident in the eyes of some, particularly those individuals who "speak with their eyes." The eyes of such individuals may reveal their inner selves more clearly and accurately than anything else.

Such sufferers, who have learned to rest in the will of God, frequently show the evidence of their triumph even in their countenances. There may be deep lines on their faces written by their suffering, but mixed with those lines will be others that reveal a quiet peace that passeth understanding.

# 7
# Reactions to Suffering

Regardless of why suffering comes or whether or not relief is provided, it will never leave us the same. It is doubtful if any other experiences will shape and mold our lives as much as times of real suffering. Such experiences, to use an expression of one who has carried an unusually heavy load for many years, "will make us better or bitter." Suffering will tend to open or close our hearts to the hurts of others. It will give us a deeper sympathy for people, or it will isolate us from them. It will draw us closer to God or drive us further away. "The sun which melts the wax also hardens the clay."

What suffering does for us, or what God is able to do for us through suffering, will depend largely on our reactions to it. In turn, our reactions to suffering will be determined largely by our understanding of the prevalence of suffering and God's relation to it.

All of us who belong to the spiritual family of God should recognize that we are not our own, that we have been "bought with a price." Because this is true, we should glorify God in our bodies and our spirits, which belong to God (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Those bodies may be twisted or wracked with pain, but they belong to God and should be used for his glory.

### Stewards of God's Grace

Once we become thoroughly convinced that we belong to God, then it will be relatively easy for us to understand that our stewardship includes every aspect of our lives. We are not only stewards or trustees of the material things we possess; we are also stewards of life itself and all the experiences that come with life. This means, among other things, that we are responsible unto God for what we let sorrow and suffering, joy and happiness, do to and through our lives.

We should also recognize that the basic stewardship, operative in relation to every experience of life, is the stewardship of what Peter calls "the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10) or "God's varied grace" (RSV). This varied or many-colored grace of God has been expressed in the salvation we have through our union with Christ. It is Paul who plainly says, "By grace ye are saved" (Eph. 2:5). Then, in a fuller statement he says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9; cf. Rom. 3:24; 5:15,17; and especially Rom. 11:6). The stewardship responsibility of this saving grace is spelled out in the next verse: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto good works,* which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). The "unto good works" ("for," RSV) is the purpose of the salvation. We are not saved *by* good works but *for* good works.

The Christian, however, is not only saved by grace, he is also built up or matured by means of that same grace (Acts 20:32). In other words, the maturing of the child of God is a result of the manifold or varied grace of God. That grace sustains and strengthens the Christian for the experi-

ences that come with life, including times of sorrow and suffering. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to "come boldly unto the throne of grace" and assures us that we will "find grace to help in time of need" (4:16), whatever that need may be.

Many of us have discovered, with Paul, that the grace of God is sufficient for every experience. It is doubtful if we could have known this if we had not walked the way of suffering with the God of grace. The sufficiency of his grace places us under obligation to be a good steward of that grace. And it is Paul again who says that "it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Can we honestly say with Paul, "His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:10; cf. 2 Cor. 6:1), whether that grace has been expressed through our salvation or in our suffering?

The stewardship responsibility of the Christian is expressed in different ways in the New Testament. No statement is more pertinent for those who suffer than the one by Jesus that his disciples are to be "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). He himself is "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9). The light that belongs to the disciple is not a reflection of the true Light, like the moon is of the sun. Rather, the disciple is the light of the world because the true Light dwelleth within him. The light that comes from his life is basically inner and not outer. It is expressed outwardly but its source is within.

As the light of the world we are to give "light unto all that are in the house" (Matt. 5:15). Also, we are to let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father who is in heaven (v. 16). These verses apply as clearly to our night of suffering as to any other

experience in our lives. The darker the night, the brighter the light within our lives can shine if we will let it, although we can hide it under the bushel of our own self-centeredness and self-pity. Is our suffering, whatever its nature, being used in such a way as to brighten the light of our lives? Is it being used to lighten the way for others?

Our stewardship responsibility is not only directed toward God but also toward our fellowman. At least our responsibility to and for God extends to loved ones and others who are touched by our lives. If we are good stewards of our sorrow and suffering, God will be able to use us as a source of help to others. If we have the victory in and over our suffering, others will tend to turn to us for an understanding of suffering and for strength and comfort in their time of suffering. We will be able to enter into the suffering of others in a way and to a degree that otherwise would have been impossible. Suffering is the best teacher of sympathy.

Paul speaks of God as "the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort." He further says that God "comforteth us in all our tribulation." Notice the purpose of the comfort that comes from God: "That we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4). Here is specifically suggested a stewardship of comfort. We are stewards of the grace and comfort that God has extended to us in our time of suffering.

Many outstanding individuals, such as Helen Keller and Fanny Crosby, have been good stewards of their suffering. At least they did not permit their handicaps and the mental anguish and physical suffering that frequently accompany such handicaps to defeat them. They have been an inspiration to many people through the years.

Some of you know individuals, not as famous as Helen

Keller or Fanny Crosby but as courageous, who have overcome to a remarkable degree their physical handicaps. Some have become dynamic, attractive persons who are a challenge to all who know them. I am thinking of little Marie, who was born with badly deformed limbs and arms. She has never walked except on artificial limbs. Yet, she has completed her college education, taken a graduate degree, has married, and has a family. Rarely will one meet a more radiant Christian personality.

When one like Marie successfully surmounts a congenital handicap, and particularly when such a one maintains a cheerful, wholesome attitude toward life, we can be relatively sure that the parents have had an inner victory regarding the problem and have surrounded the growing child with a cheerful, optimistic atmosphere. Most handicapped children, so it seems, are unusually sensitive to the reactions of their parents and others.

It should not be forgotten that many individuals are so seriously handicapped that they can never achieve the success of a Marie that might inspire others. Some of you may be such an individual or you may have one in your home. The best that you can do is to accept what has come, adjust to it, and live triumphantly with it. Your reactions to your handicap or to the presence of a handicapped member of your family can be used by the Lord to make you a blessing to all who touch your life. What may seem to be a complete defeat can become through the grace of God a marvelous victory. God can use one's handicap and suffering to increase his power with God and his influence on the lives of others. This influence may be felt more through what the eyes speak than what the lips say. Inspiration may come to others through a smile that reveals a mixture of pain and peace.

E. Stanley Jones tells the story of a woman crippled with arthritis. As long as she could she attended the worship services of her church regularly. Finally she could go no longer. She wondered what she could do to be of service to her Heavenly Father and of help to her fellowman. She asked to be moved to the window of her room overlooking the street. She noticed the men going and coming from work in the factories about the same time each day. As they looked up at her she smiled; that was all she could do. The workmen got so they expected that smile each morning and each evening. When she died four factories were closed so the workers could attend her funeral. She had dedicated a smile to the purposes of God. She was a good steward of a smile.

There is open to all of us, regardless of how dark may be the shadows or how heavy the burdens, the wonderful experience of a deepened life of prayer. This may be true of prayer for ourselves, particularly if we pray that we may honor God and manifest his works through our suffering. At least, we could all wisely pray the prayer of one who had been an invalid for many years: "Lord, make me a better companion to my circumstances."

We should be concerned primarily, however, with prayer for others and for the cause of Christ in our local community and around the world. Many pastors and other church leaders can testify to the blessings that have come to them, to the work of the church, and to the cause of Christ through the prayers of those who suffer, some of whom are shut-ins. Such individuals may be shut-out to a considerable degree from fellowship with others, but they can be real shut-ins with God—shut-in to fellowship with him and a deeper understanding of how he works in answer to prayer. Not only shut-ins and others who suffer but all of us

should remember that prayer is a part of our total stewardship responsibility.

### The Lessons of Suffering

C. S. Lewis says that "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Do you remember the following little poem with words strikingly similar to those of C. S. Lewis?

I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she;
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me!

ROBERT BROWNING HAMILTON

What are some lessons that sorrow and suffering would teach us? Or, it might be more correct to ask, What lessons would God teach us through our sorrow and suffering? We can be sure that God prefers to throw nothing away. He would even utilize frustration, sorrow, and suffering in achieving his will and in building Christian character. And he evidently is more concerned with our character than he is with our comfort. He wants us to develop the stability of character that will make it possible for us to ride through the storms of life. And there is nothing that reveals the kind of foundation on which we have built—rock or sand (Matt. 7:24-27)—like the storms that come to our lives. As paradoxical as it may sound, strength and stability of character

are not only revealed by the storms but are also developed by the storms of life. Stability often comes because of the sufferer's deepened fellowship with and dependence upon the Lord. In other words, the Lord gives us the grace and strength to face and ride through the storms of life. In turn, the strength of character that may come through suffering is the work of God's grace, but even God can work only as we cooperate with him.

Some lessons God teaches us through suffering are relatively easy to learn. Others are much more difficult. Some require a lifetime, and then it is doubtful if we learn them completely. Many of the most meaningful lessons are learned only by those whose suffering is severe and over a long period of time.

Some of the most significant lessons that can be learned through suffering have already been mentioned. Among these is the need to cultivate the capacity to rest in the Lord and to wait patiently for him. Another important lesson, one which we have previously suggested and which many of us need to learn, is our stewardship responsibility for suffering.

If we are good stewards of suffering, we will discover that suffering will open some doors into the lives of other people when no other key would fit the lock. Suffering can enable us to enter into the suffering of others. This will be true to the fullest, however, only of those who have made a satisfactory adjustment to their own suffering. Those who have learned how to carry their own burdens, with the help of the Lord, are the ones who can be used most effectively by the Lord to lighten the burdens of others. They are the ones who forget themselves and their suffering to such a degree that they can and will reach out in love to others who sorrow and suffer. They know better than others that

when they are in the presence of one with a great sorrow or one who is in intense pain or suffering, all they can wisely do is to sit or stand by quietly and prayerfully. They know by their own experience that the presence of one who understands can mean more than any spoken word.

Those who have suffered deeply know that the last few steps into the garden of suffering have to be taken alone. While no one who suffers will dare compare himself to Jesus, there is something in the Master's experience in the garden of Gethsemane that underscores the truthfulness of what has been said. When Jesus went into the garden, he took with him the three disciples who were evidently closest to him: Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. The Scriptures say that he "began to be sorrowful and very heavy." He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me." Then "he went a little farther" into the garden (Matt. 26:37-39). Those last few steps as he struggled with the will of God had to be taken alone. His struggle or agony was so intense that Luke in his descriptive way says that "his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). No one could share that agony with him. He did want, however, his three friends to tarry close by. It may be that he wanted them to see that he was not disturbed. It is possible, however, that he wanted them nearby because he felt the need for the support of the presence of his closest and most understanding friends.

Whatever may have been the situation with Jesus, we know that the One who has walked the farthest into the garden of suffering can walk the farthest with another who walks in that same way. How far, and particularly how effectively, we walk with others will depend largely on how

far we have walked with the One who went farther into the garden of suffering than anyone who has ever lived.

A minister friend was an excellent preacher but in some ways an ineffective pastor. His sermons were always carefully prepared. Even in his latter years his messages were fresh; there was evidence not only of thorough but also of recent preparation. A close friend, in appraising this preacher, once said, "He lacked only one thing of being a really great preacher." When asked what the one thing was, he replied, "A broken heart; that would have given him the warmth that he did not have. It would have enabled him in a much more effective way to have entered into the sorrow and suffering of other people. His sermons were great in head power but lacked in heart power. They did not have the outreaching love that tends to attract and draw people to the Lord."

There is a sense in which most of us are like the strings of a violin. The strings may lie on the table. No music comes from them. Attach them to a violin and some dull sounds will be all that will be heard. But what happens when a skilled musician draws those strings tighter and tighter? The strings are then ready to fulfil their purpose. It seems that our heartstrings need to be drawn tight to produce the best harmony for the Lord. Suffering tightens the strings. The sufferer still needs, however, the Master Musician to play on the strings of his heart if his life is to bring forth the most perfect harmony.

Another lesson that suffering can teach us is that character is built by solving problems, by overcoming difficulties. Just as strong muscles are developed through exercise and keen, alert minds result from solving difficult problems, so character is strengthened by meeting the storms and stresses of life. We mature by having the victory over the temptations

and pressures that would defeat us. It is doubtful if any experience can contribute more to our maturing than suffering. It will help to develop in our lives character traits that are needed if we are to live effectively for Christ and our fellowman.

The author of Hebrews says that though Christ was "a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (5:8). This is one of the character traits that God would build into our lives through the things which we suffer. He wants us to be obedient to his will and purpose, even though we may not understand fully either why suffering comes or God's relation to suffering. It is also said in Hebrews that the captain ("pioneer," RSV) of our salvation was made "perfect through sufferings" (2:10; cf. 5:9). We can never become perfect, complete, or mature as he was, but in fellowship with him in our suffering we can and should move in that direction.

Another character trait that most of us need more of is patience. Suffering, more than any other experience of life, can teach us to be patient. Patience is closely related to one's ability to wait upon the Lord. As we wait upon him or tarry in his presence we become more patient with loved ones and with others whom we touch from day to day.

A young father became noticeably more patient with people after a little girl came into their home who was seriously retarded mentally and handicapped physically. The doctors told the father and mother that she would be with them for only a few years. She lived to be six years old. In those brief years as her father suffered with her, she worked her way into his heart and life to an unusual degree. As he reached out in tenderness to her, his heart became more and more tender toward all and particularly toward those who suffered. He may not have been conscious of the change that

took place in his life, but his friends were definitely aware of it. Needless to say, patience comes only to those who react wisely or rightly to suffering.

Suffering may also help to develop in us a proper evaluation of the values of life. We will tend to see more clearly that the material things are temporary; that the things that last are the spiritual values of life. This is a difficult lesson for those who live in a materially oriented society.

Many of us know by experience that suffering deepens one's sense of need for God. This can be one of life's most significant lessons. Someone has said that "one of the shortest roads to God is that of personal need," and suffering creates in many of us that sense of need. As we reach out for God, we can be sure that he reaches for us. There can come and has come to many of God's children a deepened fellowship with God as a result of their suffering. Some of us may be able to say with Job after his trying experience: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee" (42:5). Through his experience of suffering and his search for an explanation, there had come to Job a personal knowledge of God that he had not had before. It was as superior to his previous knowledge as seeing is to hearing.

# 8
# Victory over Suffering

When the burdens become heavy and the suffering intense, the Christian's heart turns almost instinctively to the familiar promises of God. Some of these promises have already been mentioned. Possibly none is more reassuring than God's word to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (2 Cor. 12:9). Many of you have learned to rest on this and other promises of God, believing that God uses them to assure you that underneath are the everlasting arms (Deut. 33:27). Our faith in the promises of God is grounded on our faith in the greatness and goodness of God. Do you remember these familiar lines from Sidney Lanier's "The Marshes of Glynn"?

> By so many roots as the marsh-grass
> sends in the sod
> I will heartily lay me a-hold on the
> greatness of God.

### Rest on the Promises

It would be interesting and encouraging if we could share with one another some of the promises of our great God that have been particularly meaningful to us. Our favorite ones doubtless have been determined to some degree by the nature of our suffering. For example, if ours is a terminal

illness, and particularly if it involves considerable physical suffering, then our minds will tend to turn to the great promises concerning life after death and the release that comes through death. This will also be true if we suffer primarily because of a loved one who is approaching the end of the journey.

In either case, the marvelous statements by Jesus in John 14 will certainly be among our favorites. To the disciples disturbed because he was going away he said: "Let not your heart be troubled: . . . I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (vv. 1-3). Then, in the same conversation with the disciples, there are the great promises: "I will not leave you comfortless" (v. 18), and "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you," which is followed by the words of appeal and assurance: "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (v. 27).

When I came home from the hospital after the serious illness mentioned previously, our younger son, who at that time was just a lad, asked many questions about heaven that we could not answer. We had to say a number of times, "Eugene, we do not know much about heaven. We do not know much about where it is or what the conditions will be when we get there. There is one thing, however, that we do know: we know that Jesus will be there and if he is there that will be enough."

It is true, of course, that the book of Revelation reveals some things about conditions in the next life. It says that in the new heaven and new earth "God shall wipe away all tears . . . and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (21:4). We cannot know for

sure what will happen to those who are handicapped in body and retarded in mind, but we can trust that in the presence of divine love they will be able to enjoy to the fullest the blessings that come as they, along with us, join in the song of Moses and the Lamb.

Permit me to share with you three or four of my favorite promises. All of them, with the possible exception of one, are very familiar to you.

The invitation of Jesus with its attendant promise is one of those favorites. The invitation: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden." The promise: "And I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). There follows another invitation and another promise. The invitation: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart." The promise: "And ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11: 29-30). It is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who says that the yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light only to those who take up that yoke and accept that burden voluntarily. Otherwise, the yoke of Christ is hard and his burden unutterably heavy. Nevertheless, what a wonderful invitation and promise.

The invitation of Jesus with its promise reminds us of God's great promise to Moses, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest" (Ex. 33:14). It is peace by a presence. This rest or peace which comes from God "passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). Paul, in Philippians, supposedly written from prison, speaks more frequently of joy in the Lord than in any other epistle. Toward the close of the epistle he says, "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice" (4:4). Why not check for yourself the number of times Paul, in this brief letter of four chapters, uses the words "joy," "rejoice," and "rejoicing"? It could be called "The Epistle of Joy."

Psalm 23 has been a favorite of mine, as it has been of yours, since childhood. However, when I was so seriously ill, something happened that has made it more meaningful ever since. My pastor and my wife were the only ones who were permitted to visit me during the most serious part of my illness. One day when our pastor, who knew how to make a pastoral visit, started to leave, he took my hand in his through the oxygen tent. He gripped it firmly, bowed his head, and simply said, "The Lord is my shepherd." He said no more; he knew that I knew the remainder of the psalm.

Those words have come to me countless times with fresh meaning since that experience. Let us all remember that however heavy the burdens or dark the shadows may be, he is our Shepherd. And, to use some truths expressed by Jesus, let us also remember that the shepherd knows his sheep by name and the sheep know their shepherd's voice. Also, as was and is the custom in the Middle East, the shepherd goes before his sheep and they follow him (John 10:3-4). Our Shepherd will not ask us to walk in a way that he has not walked before us or in a way he will not walk with us.

Still another promise that we can rest on in time of suffering is Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." You may prefer, as I do, the Revised Standard Version's translation of this verse: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." All things do not automatically work for good; it is God who in everything works for good. Notice also that our cooperation is required—"with those who love him." We may not be able to understand how this verse can possibly be true,

but if we will accept it by faith we will find it to be a great source of strength in our time of sorrow and suffering.

Some students of the Scriptures correctly say that people tend to quote Romans 8:28 too glibly. They suggest that one needs to read verse 29 to see how "in everything God works for good with those who love him." That verse says, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son." For the mature child of God this is the most glorious part of the promise. If God can use our experiences, including sorrow and suffering, to help us conform more and more to the image of Christ, what could be more for our good? When suffering serves such a high purpose, it becomes a redemptive element in the life of the individual.

Permit me to mention one other verse that has been a great source of strength and encouragement to me for a number of years. I doubt if most of you will recognize it at all. Some years ago I was on my way to a youth meeting at one of our assemblies. I was as discouraged and perplexed as I ever get. In preparation for a writing assignment I was reading the book of Micah. I had an experience that day that many of you have had. Suddenly a verse of Scripture seemed to stand out and even jump out of the page at me. I had never seen it before; I have never forgotten it since. Here it is: "When I fall, I shall arise," and particularly the last portion of the verse, "when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me" (Micah 7:8). I certainly felt that I was in the darkness that day. But I had the experience of feeling the light that comes from the presence of God creep into my soul and dispel the darkness. There have been similar experiences on other occasions since that time.

There are many wonderful promises in the Psalms. In addition to Psalm 23, possibly some of the following are

among your favorites. Whether they are or not, I trust you will meditate upon them, letting them permeate your soul.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (27:1).

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (46:1).

Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me (50:15).

Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee (55:22).

In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee: for thou wilt answer me (86:7).

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust (91:1-2).

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou wilt revive me (138:7).

A few additional promises from the Old Testament are the following:

As thy days, so shall thy strength be (Deut. 33:25).

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness (Isa. 41:10).

I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee (41:13).

Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I

will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee (43:1-2).

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows (53:4).

As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you (66:13).

In addition to promises previously mentioned from the New Testament, there are a number of others that the Lord can use to sustain and strengthen us. The following are only a few of these:

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18).

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17).

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19).

I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day (2 Tim. 1:12).

May we hear the words of Victor Hugo and make them our own:

Have courage for the great sorrows of life, and patience for the small ones, and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.

A strong faith that those last three words are true is the secret of the peaceful heart, the triumphant spirit.

The God who is awake is the God of love. We can be assured that his love never fails, regardless of how dark may be the shadow and how heavy the burdens.

A story that is often repeated was first told, I believe, by a bishop of the Church of England. In seeking to console the relatives of some miners who had been trapped by a terrible explosion, he told them about a treasured bookmark that was given to him by his mother. He said, "It is worked in silk, and when I examine the wrong side of it, I see nothing but a tangle of threads. It looks like a big mistake. But when I turn it over and look at the right side, I see there, beautifully embroidered, the letters, 'GOD IS LOVE!' We are looking at all this today from the wrong side. Some day we will see it from another viewpoint and we shall then understand!"

### Master Your Midnights

Will we master the midnights that come in our lives or be mastered by them? We will master our midnights if we accept the stewardship of suffering, learn the lessons it would teach us, and develop the capacity to rest on the promises of God.

Paul and Silas mastered their midnight. The record says, "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God" (Acts 16:25). What a glorious thing for them to be able to pray and sing praises from a jail at midnight! Notice the order: pray and sing praises. These two belong together. One will not be able to sing praises in a jail at midnight unless he has prayed. It is the presence of the Master that enables us to master our midnights.

No wonder that when Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises, there was a miraculous demonstration of the power of God. That power not only released Paul and Silas from

jail, but a greater miracle was performed when the jailer and his household believed and were baptized.

Jesus, fully human as well as divine, mastered his midnights. This is clearly evident in what he did when he was to face in the hours immediately ahead the terrific struggle in the garden of Gethsemane and then Calvary itself. He joined with his disciples in the singing of a hymn (Matt. 26:30)— a hymn in the face of Golgotha.

We can never suffer as Christ suffered in the garden and we will never walk the slopes of Calvary as he walked them, but we will face, if we have not already faced, some midnight experiences. What we do with our midnights will depend largely on how far we have walked with him. If we are deeply conscious of his presence we can say with the psalmist: "In the night his song shall be with me (42:8; cf. 77:6). It was "his song" that Paul and Silas sang. If we sing at midnight we can be certain that it will be his song.

It cannot be emphasized too much that the secret to the mastery of our midnights is a sense of the presence of the Lord and an abiding faith in him. In that most familiar of the Psalms, we find the following glorious words: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (23:4). Let us not forget those equally glorious but less familiar words of the psalmist: "The day is thine, the night also is thine: . . . Thou hast made summer and winter" (74:16-17). Regardless of how long and dark the night or how bleak and barren the winter, they are his just as much as the day and the summer.

Christ, who is the Light of the world, has said, "He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). It is the light within our hearts, which comes from his presence, that dispels the darkness or

illumines it. In the darkness of our midnights we frequently get insights into the deeper truths of God that we have never known before. Then it is that we feel like saying with the psalmist: "If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee" (139:11-12).

The preceding correctly suggests that the presence of God with us is not dependent on external conditions such as winter or summer, night or day, darkness or light. Rather, it is dependent on whether or not we will open our hearts to him. Some of us may even sense his presence more distinctly in the darkness than in the light. At least the light that is within us which comes from God may be revealed most clearly when the shadows gather. Those of us who tend to be self-sufficient may discover that we see God more clearly through our tears than with dry eyes. Generally speaking, it is true in human experience as in the natural order that there is no beautiful sunset without some obstruction such as dust or clouds to reflect the rays of the sun. Likewise, there is no rainbow—God's promise in the sky—without raindrops for the sun to shine through. The most meaningful smile is one that has a backdrop of sorrow and suffering.

George Matheson, scholar, poet, and preacher, became blind when a boy and spent forty years of his life in darkness. Possibly the most widely known thing he ever wrote was "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." The third stanza of that song by the blind poet is as follows:

> O Joy that seekest me through pain,
> I cannot close my heart to thee;
> I trace the rainbow through the rain,

And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.

He evidently had mastered his midnight.

In the midst of the midnight we can have the quietness and peace that comes from the sense of God's presence. Dr. George W. Truett told a beautiful story at the funeral of a pastor friend. A young mother had died and left a four-year-old son. The night after the mother's funeral the father was awakened by the crying of his orphaned son. In the dark the boy cried out, "Daddy, are you there?" The father, who thoughtfully had pulled the boy's bed over close to his, answered, "Yes, son, I am here," and reached out his hand and laid it on the boy's body. The crying lad grasped it in both of his hands. His crying ceased, and he was soon asleep again, secure in the sense of the presence of his father. So it is with us and our Heavenly Father in the midst of our darkest midnight. He will be there to comfort and assure us if we will respond to his presence.

Let us not forget that every midnight is followed by the morning of a new day. How wonderful to know that there will come a time when we will awake in his likeness (Psalm 17:15). Even the darkness of death is not the end. By faith we can say with Paul, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55). We can also triumphantly say with him, "But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 57).

Someone tells a touching story about two children, a girl twelve years old and a brother of six, who had lost their mother. They were sent from their home in Europe in care of steamship and railroad companies to join their father who had gone to America to establish a new home for his family. The younger child had made the trip well until they

were transferred to the train in New York. Night was coming on. Being weary and missing his mother, he began to cry aloud.

The sister, with a mother's instinct, took her weeping brother in her arms and softly sang to him a familiar lullaby that he had heard his mother sing many times. As she tucked a blanket around him she whispered in his ear the reassuring words: "Go to sleep now. This is the last night and when morning comes we shall see Father." How grateful we should be that some time the last night will come: in the morning we shall see our Heavenly Father.

### Glorify God

The familiar words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism say that "man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever."

This chapter on "Victory over Suffering" would not be complete without at least a brief statement concerning the glory of God. The Christian should so react to suffering, as well as every other experience that comes with life, as to bring glory to the One who has redeemed him. Even in the darkest midnight we should let our light so shine before men that they will glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

When Jesus was notified of the sickness of Lazarus, he said, "This sickness is . . . for the glory of God" (John 11:4). At the grave of Lazarus he said to Martha, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" (v. 40). Every sickness, sorrow, or suffering that comes to a child of God should be "for the glory of God" and will be if his faith holds firm. Whatever the source of the suffering, God wants to use it for our good

and his glory; and incidentally, there is no conflict between our good and his glory.

Whether or not suffering is for the glory of God will depend on our reactions to it. There is little that can be said in addition to what has already been said in this chapter. In other words, we will glorify God in and through our suffering if we accept it as a part of our total stewardship, if we learn the lessons God would teach us through our suffering, if we lean upon the great promises of God in times of suffering, and if we develop the inner resources that will enable us to master our darkest hours—our midnight experiences.

If we do all these things even to a reasonable degree, the grace and power of God in our lives will be evident to others. They will see that his grace has been sufficient for us. To use the expression that Jesus used concerning the man born blind, loved ones, friends, and even passing acquaintances will see that "the works of God" are made manifest in us (John 9:3). This will definitely be true if we open our lives to the indwelling Spirit in such a way and to such a degree that our suffering will make us a blessing rather than a burden to others.

Frequently the sufferer adjusts better to his suffering than loved ones who stand by. At times he seems to have a secret source of strength and a deepened understanding of life. Many times the most seriously handicapped, the most constant sufferers are the most cheerful and victorious. We have in our city the Crusaders Chapel, a special church for the handicapped. Many of them are in wheelchairs. They largely conduct their own services. One will never meet a more cheerful group. There is evidence on many of their faces of great suffering, but at the same time some of those faces reflect a joy unspeakable and the peace that comes from

God. They have glorified and do glorify God through their handicaps and suffering. It seems at times, to use an expression of Paul's, that the suffering of these wonderful Christian friends has turned out for the furtherance of the gospel (Phil. 1:12).

I know of no one who has glorified God more through his suffering than a friend of many years. He has been a cripple since he was a lad. On a number of occasions he spent weeks at a time in the hospital. After many operations and numerous treatments, the verdict was that he would be a cripple the rest of his life. His "trademark" for many years has been a built-up shoe on one foot to compensate for a short leg and a cane to assist him as he walks. Through the years he has been a most effective speaker and writer, particularly for young people. His dynamic, triumphant Christian spirit is revealed in all he does.

He summarizes what his lameness has done for him in the following words:

> Physical lameness has brought to me rich resources of strength which, otherwise, I might have failed to possess. It has brought to me, as only personal suffering can, an understanding of other people who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; and with that understanding has come a warm desire to help. For me, physical lameness has opened windows, unlocked doors, widened horizons, deepened understandings, heightened sympathies, sharpened powers, and enriched with spiritual victories. Thank God for lameness!

This Christian friend has been a good steward of his suffering, he has learned the lessons that God would teach through suffering, he has rested on the promises of God, he has mastered the midnight experiences of his life, and hence he has glorified God in and through the things he has suffered.

# 9
# A Final Word

This book has been an attempt to set forth a perspective concerning the relation of God to human suffering, the universal experience of mankind. The present chapter is an effort to restate, in compact form, the basis for that perspective. Several general statements will be made. Each one will be followed by a conclusion regarding suffering which is based upon that statement.

1. *Statement:* All of life is governed by basic laws. This fact is clearly evident in the natural order; it is less clearly seen in the social order. Some of these laws are well known, others unknown.

*Conclusion:* Since all of life is governed by basic laws we can correctly conclude that there is a cause and effect relationship between certain of these laws and suffering.

2. *Statement:* The consequence or penalty for the violation of the basic laws of life is not external to those laws but is inherent in them.

*Conclusion:* Suffering comes when one or more of the basic laws of life have been violated. Such violation may be deliberate and premeditated or it may be through ignorance. The violation may be by the individual who suffers, by other individuals, by a social group such as the family, the school, the church, or even by the community.

3. *Statement:* The basic laws of life are written into our nature and into the nature of the world in which we live by the God who created both the world and men who occupy that world.

*Conclusion:* Since God is the source of the basic laws of life and since suffering comes through the operation of those laws, then it can be correctly said that God ultimately is responsible for suffering.

4. *Statement:* God who is the source of the basic laws ordinarily permits those laws to operate without interfering with them. This gives to us a dependable, stable, predictable world in which to live rather than an unstable, uncertain one.

*Conclusion:* Most sorrow and suffering can be attributed to God only in the sense that he usually permits the basic laws of life to operate, and hence he permits sorrow and suffering. Instead of working a miracle to send suffering, in the vast majority of cases God would have to work a miracle to keep it from coming.

5. *Statement:* There are times when it seems that God steps into the operation of the basic laws of life and makes them operate more effectively than they would have without his intervention or presence. This probably is seen most clearly in the operation of the laws of health.

*Conclusion:* God at times may have a direct part to play in suffering. From what we know of God through his self-disclosure in Christ, we believe that he more frequently intervenes or steps in to relieve suffering than to send it. Whether it is to send or relieve suffering, it seems that God, in the vast majority of cases, works in harmony with and through the basic laws rather than contrary to them.

6. *Statement:* God, who is the source of the basic laws of life, is more powerful than those laws; the Creator has

the right and the power to control what he has created. He can and seemingly does at times set aside or abrogate some of the laws of life.

*Conclusion:* Whether God steps into the operation of the basic laws of life to energize those laws to an unusual degree, or sees fit to set them aside or abrogate them, we can be sure that he does so for some high and holy purpose. There is a sense in which a lower law is set aside for the sake of a higher law. That higher law serves the purposes of God.

7. *Statement:* God wants to use suffering for the good of the sufferer, for the good of loved ones and others who share in the suffering, and for his glory. He wishes to make manifest his works through our suffering.

*Conclusion:* What God is able to do for us and through us because of suffering depends on our reactions to it. Some may accept suffering, but in such a way as to be defeated by it. They may resign themselves to a life of suffering, but fail to have the victory in and over it. It is only the victorious who can learn the deepest lessons God would teach us through suffering. Only the victorious souls can and will use suffering in the fullest sense to glorify God.

What are we letting God do for us through our suffering? Is our suffering being used to manifest the works of God in the world?

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